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Sin and Confession Among the Colonial Nahuas: The Confessional as a Tool for Domination

The Christian concepts of sin and confession formed an important part of the European technology of domination over the Indian communities of the new World. Sacramental confession, and the religious context within which it was embedded, served military, political, economic, and social functions by acting as both an *external* mechanism of social control, subjecting personal behavior and subjective ideas to the public scrutiny of non-Indians, and as an *internal* mechanism of self-control, which resulted from successful attempts to inculcate guilt, fear, or devotion upon the minds of the penitents. While the overt goal of this sacrament was to facilitate divine forgiveness for mortal sins, and thus make temporal consolation and eternal salvation possible, its net effect was to contribute substantially to the establishment and maintenance of an efficient system of socioeconomic control favorable to the post-Contact ruling elites. The pragmatic desire on the part of religious and lay officials was to develope in the hearts of the indigenes an ethos of Hispanic order, loyalty, obedience, and responsability that would obviate the need for expensive administrative and military controls. In effect, the right to hear confessions and determine penances shifted to the Church a large portion of the local policing responsibilities that would otherwise have fallen on the shoulders of the secular powers.

Efficient administration required that the behavior of the natives and Europeans be predictable, docile, and productive in ways that would benefit the colony. To this end European modes of reward, punishment, discipline, and surveillance were deployed throughout every layer of society. The crass measures of the Inquisition suffered en early failure, as evidenced by its limited application to Indians after the burning of the cacique Don Carlos in 1539. Consequently, more local, less public forms of intelligence gathering and religious discipline were employed to control the behavior of the non-privileged native sectors before any form of deviancy could become a costly judicial or military problem. Chief among these strategies of surveillance and ideological regulation were coerced and induced confessions (within and outside the confessional), penances, forced restitutions, public shaming, ridicule, and physical punishment.

The confessional played a supporting role in the colonization of the native mind. It justified many of the more visible regulating forces and made possible for Europeans a deeper and more widespread understanding of Indian life at the local level than the cultural barriers would othierwise have permitted. Given the modern scholarly concern with the secular mechanisms that shaped the new colonial order, it is easy to underestimate the importance of sin and confession for the formation of a disciplined, colonialized will. Nonetheless, the proliferation and popularity of bilingual manuals for confessors of Indians point to the importance attached to the confessional by both religious and secular authorities. Though it is difficult to assess how well these manuals fulfilled their objectives, their prefaces and self-serving introductions make clear that many priests considered them extremely useful. In essence, they consciously aimed to simplify the implementation of missionary and Hispanicizing agendas while serving as a handy catalogue of native resistance and survival strategies.

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Nonetheless, the confessors had to serve contradictory interests. Many missionaries and secular clergy worked hard to make palatable the effects of the physical and judicial presence of Europeans on their parishioners. Along with local officials, they had the task of convincing the indigenes to accept peaceably their shifting politico-economic and sociocultural positions in the face of labor drafts, residential displacements, cyclical inflations, forced consumption, land losses, diseases, and so on. However, in opposition to some dominant sectors, the priests sought to dominish the effects of unconscionable exploitation. At the same time that they gave weight to burdensome official ordinances by threatening the poor Indians with moral opprobrium and ecclesiastical discipline, the confessors were responsible for imposing religious sanctions against abusive local leaders. Therefore, they had the difficult job of inculcating Christian attitudes and behaviors that promoted respect for authority and the Spanish institutions while seeking to protect the lives and "souls" of their parishioners from the frequently conflicting concerns of the Crown, the colonists, and the native nobility

This complex balancing act led to lengthy treatises on the methods and questions proper for the confessional. No set of questions could satisfy all interests, much less the specific claims of any one sector. However, the basic aim of the interrogations was consistent: to Christianize the natives and to transform them into peaceful, loyal subjects of the colonial administration. This required a careful examination of Christian beliefs and the proper observance of rituals; investigation into economic behavior to root out whatever was considered unjust by the Spanish sector, which benefited extensively from restrictions on native commercial activity; the promotion of forms of political organization that favored the colonial hierarchy and promoted native subordination to approved local leaders; and the imposition of moral comportment that would lead to social peace, the adoption of European ideals of proper sexual behavior, and the moderation of personal habits in order to make the penitent conform with the Spanish model of docile servitude. All this was encouraged by designating deviations as sinful and therefore subject to temporal and eternal punishments.

In general, the confessional guides follow the order of the catechism of the Christian doctrine. Thus the questions are arranged according to the Ten Commandments, the seven mortal sins, the seven works of charity, and similar organizing categories. In the appropriate places the longest manuals have detailed discussions on the sacraments, the form wills should take, and other matters relevant to proper pastoral care. The inclusive range of topics raised in the guides underlines the aggressiveness with which the Church sought to bring as many human activities as possible under its surveillance. In doing so, it superimposed moral categories of good (grace) and evil (sin), and spiritual categories of reward (salvation) and punishment (damnation, penance) upon secular economic, political, and sociological functions. The importance attached to the affairs regulated by each category of sin is suggested by the amount of space each received. In Fray Alonso de Molina's 1569 *Confessionario mayor en la lengua mexicana y castellana*, the most detailed and comprehensive manual published in the colonial period, economic activities (the seventh commandment) take up more than three times the number of pages devoted to sexuality (the sixth commandment), and almost five times the pages concerned with idolatry, pagan practices, and Christian rituals (third commandment), or homicide and criminal assaults (fourth commandment).

Though manuals for confessors were available in the vernacular since 1510,[1] the earliest known bilingual (Nahuatl-Spanish) handbook is the *Confessionario breve* of Fray Alonso de Molina published in 1565. However, informal bilingual confessional guides, in abbreviated manuscript form, circulated widely before this time. Motolinía, the Franciscan chronicler, states that the sacrament of penance was first introduced in 1526 and shortly thereafter

[1]Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton, 1977), p. 42.

the Indians were being confessed in accordance with the order of the Ten Commandments.[2] As was his custom, Motolinía generalizes the extent of early Christian devotion to the confessional from a handful of exceptional, edifying cases and much poorly understood native symbolic behavior; nonetheless, he offers some early examples of the economic role the confessional played in the forced leveling of social statuses and the redistribution of goods at the local level through imposed and voluntary acts of penitential restitution. Writing in 1540 about the willingness of many converts to pay their debts before their Lenten confession, Motolinía cites a number of cases of restitution via the releasing of slaves, the giving of alms, or the repayment of gold owed.[3] As early as 1537 detailed confessions were being imposed on the natives to the extent that they were sometimes compelled to note the number and type of their sins in script (if literate) or, more commonly, through detailed pictographic texts or coded mnemonic devices.[4]

The existence of tables of contents and thematic and alphabetical indices are evidence of the pragmatic nature of the guides. They were meant to be used frequently and efficiently, however extensive their treatment of each sin or category of sinner. Though limited resources made general confessions more practical, without these bilingual texts most confessors would have been unable to carry out the detailed examinations of conscience that had become particularly popular in the sixteenth century.[5] Despite the fact that many of the questions have a history that dates back at least to the early penitentials of the thirteenth century, contemporary socioeconomic, historical, and cultural practices were reflected in the texts that sought to be immediately relevant and up-to-date. As could be expected, the most commonly used guides in central Mexico were those that were culture-specific enough to yield the maximum amount of pertinent local information and that provided the Náhuatl wording for eliciting it. The differences among the manuals used, from Molina's to the bachiller don Carlos Celedonio Velásquez de Cárdenas y León's 1761 *Breve práctica y régimen del confessionario de indios*, point to the varieties of local knowledge embedded in these works. It could not have been otherwise; the disciplinary function of the guides was most effective when they reflected actual experiences familiar to the confessants.

Questions of local relevance sometimes suggested geographical contrasts between the Náhuatl-speaking communities. For instance, hallucinogens play a relatively minor role in the urban-oriented work of Molina, whereas Bartholomé de Alva's 1634 guide, which relies on his experiences in the region of Chiapa de Mota (Chapa de Mota, northeast of Mexico City in the state of Mexico) is quick to put in the mouth of the (typical) penitent the following confession:

> Yes I have loved (God) with my whole heart, but sometimes I have believed in dreams, in herbs, in the *ololiuhqui*, the peyote and other things.[6]

Urban life represented the Spanish ideal of civilized society. However, as is well known, sixteenth-century missionaries sought to separate the Indians from the Spaniards, physically and morally. While this segregation was a real possibility during the early period of the encomienda, when the Spanish city and the native communities stood in sharp relief, the subsequent decline in the Indian population and the accompanying shift to the *repartimiento* labor draft system, after the 1540s, made the division less tenable. The juxtaposition of ignorant but idolatrous countryside and corrupt but Christian city formed part of the

[2]Toribio de Benavente (or Motolinía), *Memoriales o libro de las cosas de la Nueva España y de los naturales de ella*, preliminary study by Edmundo O'Gorman (Mexico City, 1971), pp. 128-29.
[3]Ibid., pp. 131-36.
[4]Ibid, pp. 129, 137-38.
[5]Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation*, p. 79.
[6]Bartolomé de Alva, *Confessionario mayor, y menor en lengua mexicana* (Mexico City, 1634), fol. 8v.

colonial mythology surrounding the geography of sin, but it was considered false by some of the most informed priests. Fray Alonso de Montúfar, Archbishop of Mexico, wrote the Council of the Indies in 1556 that the jurisdictional jealousies among the religious orders, and between these and the secular priests, were causing the natives to be so ill-served "that even here in Mexico [City], where the Indians should be better Christians, they are the worse".[7] This polemical assertion received confirmation in the 1570s when Fray Diego Durán affirmed that daily,

> not only in the towns distant from Mexico [City], where there would be some excuse, there being a lack of preaching, ...but in those near Mexico [City] and in Mexico [City] itself there are so many evils and superstitions and Indians as idolatrous as during their ancient law, medics, conjurers, impostors, and old preachers of their damned [religion], that they make it impossible for it to be forgotten, teaching it to the young and the children...[8]

Jacinto de la Serna, in his *Manual de ministros de Indios para el conocimiento de sus idolatrías y extirpación de ellas*, written in the first half of the seventeenth century, argues that since the forced nucleation of settlements, during the period of *congregaciones*, the idolators brought into the villages and towns the idolatry they had practiced in the mountains.[9] As a consequence, he adds,

> All these [superstitions and idolatries] are so common that they can be found today [1647] in the city [of Mexico], where it is least noticed, and where the ministers of Satan can most safely work their tricks... everyone inside and outside the City [Mexico], and throughout the whole kingdom is infected passively or actively: some because they make use of all the conjurations, tricks, and superstitions..., and others passively permitting them to use these...[10]

The constant colonial conflict between city and countryside is reflected in these (unexpected) descriptions of cities, particularly Mexico, as *the* centers of moral and spiritual corruption. Though religious and secular struggles for control and influence permeated these accusations, they also represented a native response to the unwelcomed colonial strategy of urbanization, advocated primarily by the Church and Crown, and the contradictory needs for a mobile labor force experienced by landholders in and outside of the cities.

Sixteenth-century shifts in labor recruitment practices, resulting principally from the declining native populations and increasing numbers of blacks and Europeans, threatened the most vulnerable Indian communities with social disarticulation and cultural extinction. The most serious abuses against the native groups were caused by the dominant sector's need for a cheap, mobile labor force capable of fulfilling the demands of the repartimiento, the mines, and the *obrajes*. Besides recourse to the courts, one of the few mechanisms available with which to resist these centrifugal forces was the deployment of pre- and post-Contact religious elements that could give coherence and cohesion, personally and collectively, to the desintegrating communities. Consequently, short-lived, regional nativistic movements sometimes arose. These were mostly poorly coordinated efforts at spiritual resistance to Christianization, as represented by the case of Martín Ocelotl, the clandestine cult leader exiled from New Spain in 1537 by the Inquisition.[11] More commonly, resistance

[7]Luis García Pimentel, ed., *Descripción del Arzobispado de México hecha en 1570 y otros documentos* (Mexico City, 1897), p. 424.
[8]Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e islas de la tierra firme*, 2 vols., edition and preliminary study by Ángel Ma. Garibay K. (Mexico City, 1967), p. 78.
[9]Jacinto de la Serna, *Manual de ministros de indios para el conocimiento de sus idolatrías y extirpación de ellas*, in *Tratado de las Idolatrías*, vol. 1, preliminary study by Francisco del Paso y Troncoso (Mexico City, 1953), p. 93.
[10]Ibid., pp. 333-34.
[11]J. Jorge Klor de Alva, "Martín Ocelotl: Clandestine Cult Leader", in Gary B. Nash and David. G. Sweet, eds., *Struggle and Survival in Colonial America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1981).

to Hispanization and religious indoctrination was passive and very local.[12] This constant spiritual opposition, whose legacy is evident in the contemporary ethnographies of Mesoamerica, resulted in the frequent unearthing of new centers of pagan worship. These periodic discoveries made imperative the gathering of intelligence concerning the whereabouts and activities of native cult leaders and local sorcerers who sought to undermine the official authorities.[13] Many of the questions found under the first commandment in the guides sought to counter these competing symbolic systems. For instance:

> By chance did you adore or have for a god some creature of His, such as the sun, moon, or the stars? Are you still keeping some image of the devil or know of someone who has one hidden? ... Did you offer some offering, or give it some present: or...incense, or cut some paper, or did you kill some animal before it? ... Did you ever call for a sorcerer [*ticitl*] to tell your fortune or to remove some bewitchment from your body, and in order to suck your flesh did he cut your hair in a superstitious manner, or did you call him to find what you had lost, or did he divine [by looking] into water in your presence?[14]

The Christian priests also used questions on the first commandment to guard against the circumvention of ecclesiastical financial and ritual prerogatives. With some of the same economic preoccupations in mind that moved Molina and others to outline carefully the appropriate form testaments should take, Bartholomé de Alva asks,

> Perchance, when someone died...did you bury him placing in the grave a cloth of *nequen* [*ayatl*], *piciete*, *mecapal*, shoes, money, food, and drink, and all concealed from your priest? And this diabolical custom that you have, is it to provide him with such things, because you think he will return to live here on the earth at some time, because he has left the present life to go do penitence in that place (which the elders during the period of blind paganism...) called Ximoayan?[15]

In the sixteenth century the recruitment and distribution of labor was primarily in the hands of local native leaders, who took their orders from colonial officials. Therefore, the responsibility for creating a mobile labor force fell on caciques and other leaders; however, they gained more from employing the workers locally than from shipping them out. As a consequence, some confessionals provided confessors with a series of interrogations whose object was to free labor from personal or community-oriented employment and to facilitate its impressment in the service of Spanish interests. In the name of unrestrained employment and free trade, Molina urges the confessor to ask the following:

> Did you {by chance} order that nobody hire himself out to others until your properties were attended first? or did you prohibit and obstruct them so that they would not go where they pleased to gain their livelihood or look for employment, or so they would not go to sell their goods and lands wherever they pleased? because you cannot impede them, nor obstruct them {except if the village had need of such goods or lands, so that they should be sold there}.[16]

[12]J. Jorge Klor de Alva, "Christianity and the Aztecs", *San José Studies*, 5 (November, 1979), pp. 6-21; Klor de Alva, "Spiritual Conflict and Accommodation in New Spain: Toward a Typology of Aztec Responses to Christianity", in George A. Collier, Renato I. Rosaldo, and George D. Wirth, eds., *The Inca and Aztec States,1400-1800: Anthropology and History* (New York, 1982).

[13]See, for instance, Juan Bautista, *Confessionario en lengua mexicana y castellana* (Mexico City, 1600); Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón, *Aztec Sorcerers in Seventeenth-Century Mexico: The Treatise on Superstitions by Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón*, translated and edited by Michael D. Coe and Gordon Whittaker (Albany, 1982); Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón, *Treatise on the Heathen Superstitions That Today Live Among the Indians Native to This New Spain*, 1629, translated and edited by J. Richard Andrews and Ross Hassing (Norman, 1984).

[14]Alonso de Molina, *Confessionario mayor, en la lengua mexicana y castellana* (Mexico City, 1569), fols. 20r, v. (facsimile edition with an introduction by Roberto Moreno de los Arcos in the supplement to the *Boletín del Instituto de Investigaciones Bibliográficas*, 7 (Mexico City, 1972).

[15]Alva, *Confessionario*, fols. 12v, 13r.

[16]Molina, *Confessionario mayor*, fol. 43r.

> Did you obstruct {by chance} the *macehuales* who wanted to go live and construct their house in other towns, prohibiting them from selling their homes and personal lands, or their other lands?[17]

Then, as today, arguments on behalf of unrestricted trade primarily benefited those who did not need protection.

The confessors could contribute to social control by raising the socioeconomic price of deviant behavior through the imposition of harsh penances. But this could drive penitents away to more lenient confessors or away from the confessional altogether. Therefore, for confessions to be truly effective the penitents had to internalize basic Christian attitudes toward spiritual transgressions: sin had to cause pain and absolution had to feel redemptive enough to make punishments tolerable. Thus, the long enumeration of sins with pragmatic explanations of their worldly effects were a necessary complement to spiritual threats of eternal perdition. No matter how mundane the topic, sin was constantly maintained as the fundamental subject of confession, and as many practical activities as possible were brought under its purview. Furthermore, all social virtues were transformed into religious precepts, and all vices into sins. The gravity of each was elucidated, and proportional degrees of culpability were pronounced. Consequently, in conjunction with daily and dominical preaching, the manuals attempted to teach the natives to identify every aspect of their everyday life as a potential occasion for sinful acts *and* thoughts. To instill this attitude of self-control through self-criticism, which was critical to the European strategy of domination, the manuals highlighted the importance of the "seven mortal sins:" pride, avarice, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth.

In Molina's 1569 *Confessionario* pride and sloth receive particular attention. It is tempting to interpret this emphasis as implying that these two sins symbolized two key threats to Hispanic order: insubordination and an unwillingness to labor in work beneficial to those outside the immediate Indian communities. However, Molina's questions seem to bear out this reading only in the case of pride. The examination of this sin sought to uncover and chastise ("false") affirmations of dominion, claims to privileged information, resistance to ecclesiastical or secular authority, and acts aimed at drawing attention to oneself. The social leveling function of this interrogation was meant to apply to both commoners and leaders, the latter being admonished to lead with humility and to refrain from flaunting their wealth. In effect, native leaders and their charges were being urged to refrain from questioning authority and to accept their subordinate positions with Christian resignation. Though questions concerning sloth fill over 25 pages, most of these focus on negligence towards the sacraments, particularly confirmation. This sacrament solidified the faith of adults by renewing and strengthening the baptismal commitment to Christianity. Therefore, it was central in creating the adult Christian community and crucial in the continual war against apostasy or indifference. The economic significance of sloth was discussed in fewer words:

> By chance due to your laziness did you ever say: 'oh if only I had not worked nor done the good I did?' And because of this you proposed and determined to waste your time, and to employ it in entertainments and games, and in being lazy; and in strolling around the plazas and other places, like a vagabond in order to not work in what is necessary; and due to this you do not have what is necessary to maintain your person, your wife or children...?[18]

Even though we do not have a comprehensive study of the social damage caused by the epidemics of the sixteenth century, we know that these, in combination with the abuses that resulted from the colonial mechanisms of exploitation, produced a moral decline in

[17] *Ibid.*, fol. 43v.
[18] *Ibid.*, fol. 98r.

the most afflicted communities.[19] The recurrent tragedies created an atmosphere in which abortions and suicides were transformed into acts of resistance and defiance. Consequently, it is not surprising to find detailed questions on the subject in the manual of 1569, written during the horrible plagues of 1563-64 and 1566, when it is said that almost half the population of Chalco died.[20] By way of contrast, Bautista's text, published more than ten years after the last major plagues of the century, when the population of the laboring class had stabilized after the many deaths of the previous decades, limits its questions on suicide and abortion, found under the fifth commandment, to the following:

> Did you take or give deadly drinks to anyone? Did you take something to make you sterile or to cause you to abort, or perhaps did you do this to some other person?[21]

Molina, on the other hand, poses questions suggestive of the desperation faced by the Indians and the role of the priests in controlling it:

> Did you ever desire your death? ... Did you give any pregnant woman potions to make her miscarry, and so that the child would die? And if the penitent is a woman...Did you ever drink a mortal poison to miscarry the child, by which you killed your child...? Or did you give it the breast in such a way that it was damaged and he was no longer able to suckle...? And when you were still pregnant did you press on your belly in order to miscarry and kill your child?... Did you carry some load, or grind something, so that you came to miscarry? Did you drink some potions to make yourself sterile...and so that you would never reproduce? With evil intention did you ever hurt a male, at the time of copulation, and thus he got sick and died?[22]

Questions concerning the sixth commandment were a critical aspect of the political technology deployed by the Spaniards in order to subjugate native bodies and transform these into efficient productive forces. Knowledge about the intimate, private behavior of the Nahuas, extracted by the confessors, multiplied the points at which the colonial institutions could intervene in the lives of the penitents. On the other hand, exposing the natives to new sins by the use of suggestive questions increased their vulnerability to European ideological controls.

While it is extremely difficult to understand what Molina meant by the last question noted in the quote above, the manual of Bartolomé de Alva sheds some light on both the birth control and pleasure aspects that may have been addressed by the interrogation:

> Have you mocked any woman (and if it is a woman) any man, by putting some evil thing in your natural part, when you approached her, from which she derived some disease?[23]

Restrictions on efforts at population control through characterization of them as dangerous or belligerent could be what is at stake here, but this could also be read as an attempt to limit native sexuality through the superimposition of European models. The relation between the control of intimate behavior and productive activity is well known: repression of the former reinforces the disciplining of the latter. The making of docile native bodies required that all areas of bodily performance be trained in new habits and exercised in new social arrangements. Thus the widespread practice of cohabitation, representing a continuation of native habits of familial organization, was continually

[19]Enrique Florescano and Elsa Malvido, eds., *Ensayos sobre la historia de las epidemias en Mexico*, 2 vols. (Mexico City, 1982).
[20]Charles Gibson, *The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule: A History of the Indians of the Valley of Mexico, 1519-1810* (Stanford, 1964), p. 449.
[21]Bautista, *Confessionario*, fols. 48r, v.
[22]Molina, *Confessionario mayor*, fols 30v-31v.
[23]Alva, *Confessionario*, fol. 24v.

assailed, and those guilty of this transgression were predictably persecuted as both sinners and seditionaries.

Questions inspired by the Christian focus of sexuality on reproduction generated knowledge about native intimacy whose traces cannot be found outside the manuals. For instance, we now know that it was popular among Náhuatl speakers to make love "outside of the usual vessel" and with the "woman...on her belly", practices strictly prohibited by the Church. Sodomy, especially when the men were drunk, was not rare, nor was lesbianism. Concerning this last point, the 1611 manual of the Dominican Martín de León warns confessors to be sure to ask the following "to virgins and single girls, it being very common":

> Have you ever layed one above the other, playing like man and woman by way of mockery and play somewhere?[24]

And with regard to the sin of onanism he adds:

> Have you defiled yourself with your heels, when you grind or when you are sitting down someplace?[25]

These examples point to the depths accessible to colonializing practices as a consequence of the confessionals. In effect, the displacement of native bodily customs by colonial Spanish ones was a significant tactic in the overall strategy of domination, and a necessary complement to the mechanisms for the extraction of useful labor and the disciplining of commercial habits.

The comprehensiveness of Molina's text makes it particularly useful for studying the relations between the confessional and the colonial politico-economic order. Its questions sketch the connections between the various socioeconomic sectors, the responsibilities and privileges of each, the land tenure issues that precipitated conflicts, the modes of operation found within the markets, and the variety of ways -common among merchants- by which they sought to maximize their profits through deceit. It is worth repeating that Molina dedicated three times more space to the seventh commandment than to any other. In part, this is due to the fact that his text, one of the earliest, is especially concerned with legitimizing the still envolving colonial structure. Consequently, many of the colonial practices Bartolomé de las Casas considered a sin (and attacked vehemently when writing about the abuses of the Spaniards)[26] were transformed by Molina into *positive duties.*

Throughout the section on the seventh commandment one can discern the ways in which the society was affected by the colonial processes that leveled the pre-Contact hierarchy. Many members of the lower sectors were integrated into the higher strata, and those in dominant positions frequently found themselves deprived overnight of autonomy or privileges. The manual strives to convince everyone to accept their destiny in silence, to work diligently and honestly, to obey with respect and humility, and to revere the tenets of Church and Crown. Trade, production, and local government are reinterpreted as moral activities, subjects open to the judgment of secular and spiritual observers. In effect, despite the fact that its moral commands apply to all sectors, the practical effect of the confessional was to deprive most Indian penitents of the right, reserved to some Spaniards, to buy cheap and sell dear.

Of course, as noted above, one can also find many questions that demonstrate the very real effort made by the Church to safeguard the poor from the abuses of their superiors. But the protective sanctions, in the end, favor the Spanish economic sector, either through

[24]Martín de León, *Camino del cielo en lengua mexicana* (Mexico City, 1611), p. 116.
[25]*Ibid.*
[26]Bartolomé de las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, 3 vols., preliminary study by Lewis Hanke (Mexico City, 1951); Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria*, 2 vols., preliminary study by Edmundo O'Gorman (Mexico City, 1967).

depriving authentic local leaders of power, disrupting the local merchants' trading patterns, or by facilitating the mobilization of the members of the Nahua communities so that they can be made to work beyond the local economic community. Thus, the native merchant is prohibited from making any sale that will enrich him if when doing so "he has not acted in favor and to the benefit of the city...but only to gain self enrichment".[27] Though a desire to protect consumers moved Molina to urge confessors to probe deeply into all the deceits possible in the marketplace, a result of these detailed interrogations was nonetheless to limit the circulation of cheap, even if admittedly inferior, products. The standard of quality suggested by Molina could only have the inadvertent effect of driving up the price of consumer goods.

The questions directed at the caciques, principal leaders, *tequitlatos*, and overseers can help us to reconstruct the relations between the various sectors in the rural zones. They put in relief the Spanish efforts at influencing to their advantage the native struggles for political and economic power. On the one hand, they hoped to profit from intra-communal conflicts by weakening native leadership; on the other, they sought to maximize the movement of goods and services from the native to the Spanish sector. The following questions are suggestive of these strategies:

> Did you ever take something from the macehuales that are in your charge, and those you govern? Did you ask them for blankets, chickens, cacao...which things they were not obliged to give you? Did you add to them or increase their tribute? Or did you take from them or demand from them something in order to give it to the Spaniard you serve, or some other cacique or leader (in order to obtain their favor)? And when everyone dances at the feasts, did you by chance ask for tribute or tortillas, or cacao, flowers, canes with incense, or mats, etc.?
>
> When the tribute was collected, did you leave or keep for yourself the surplus of the said tribute, concealing and hiding it for your benefit, or did the other leaders and nobles distribute it among themselves?[28]

Concerning the problems of land tenure and the use of lands, the confessional could be brought to bear on the issues by specifying in what ways land could be employed so that sin would not result. An effect of this moral determination of proper land use patterns was the freeing up of additional communal land for Spanish ownership or use. For example:

> And all the plots of the town, worked by the macehuales, are they {by chance} necessary for the said town? Or would it be sufficient to work less lands and plots? And being thus, did you command them to work much more land, so as to increase...the property of the community and thereby you oppressed the macehuales?[29]

The struggles throughout the sixteenth century between the religious orders and the colonists had political and economic aspects that drew the Indian leaders into the fray. The native working sectors were sometimes able to take advantage of the conflicts by mobilizing the protection of the mendicants in opposition to the local authorities; for instance, against their abusive use of the "derrama" (additional or unauthorized tribute) or of personal services. The following interrogation urged by Molina on all confessors shows the extent to which the friars were willing to confront the native leaders directly in order to protect the working Indians from over-exploitation at their hands and those of the Spaniards:

[27] Molina, *Confessionario mayor*, fol. 36r.
[28] *Ibid.*, fols. 41v, 42r.
[29] *Ibid.*, fol. 42r.

> Do you send your macehuales to far away lands, so that they will bring you fruit or flowers {from the hot lands}? Or so they will take corn to the mines? Or do you send them far from their villages so that they will work and serve the Spaniards, by which they were harmed? Or perhaps you commanded them to obtain some *derramas* or personal services, beyond that which has been commanded by the Emperor or the King, going far beyond the quota? Or by chance did you for some reason give them some work to do, such as work in your corn fields, the building of your houses, or those of your friends and dependents?
>
> Did you command your macehuales to give you their chickens, telling them you would pay for them and buy them, and then you did not give them all they were worth, in accordance with their price in the tianguez [market]? Did you {by chance} command that no one is to sell their goods, such as their corn, until yours had been sold first, or your beans, etc., thus harming the others?[30]

Sometimes local leaders protected themselves from the complaints lodged by their workers with the colonial officials by terrorizing the would-be petitioners into silence. Molina's manual challenged the wrongdoers by characterizing the practice as widespread and insisting that it be investigated:

> ...did you obstruct them and impede them so they would not appeal, nor go and complain to the royal audiencia [court], when you committed some harm or injustice on them? Or did you sentence them unjustly, or did you receive some bribe, and when you received what they gave you, did you decide against justice? Or perhaps because of what you were given you gave an evil sentence...And because of this, they did not dare go to you, because they knew and understood that you are a man without mercy and like a wild beast?[31]

A large number of examples showing how these local officials exercised political control, which was outside the communities' traditions, can be discovered by analyzing the relevant questions. We know that, like the Spaniards, they chose or put in charge people who favored them "because they were...related or...were friends". At the same time, these leaders were often protected from annual elections and audits ("residencias") at the end of their terms.[32] Nonetheless, however much Molina's probing into these local abuses benefited the non-privileged sectors, they had the ultimate effect of contributing to the eroding of native leadership and, thereby, to the weakening of the Indian communities.

The questions posed by the manuals changed as the colony of New Spain matured in the course of three centuries. The guides varied in sepecificity, comprehensiveness, and concerns. The above discussion seeks only to point to the significant roles sin and confession played in the creation of the colonial order. In a future monograph I hope to elucidate these roles in detail. For now, it is enough to note that, ultimately, the colonization of the Indians, leaders and followers, rested in no small measure on the Europeans' capacity to teach them to sin; to teach them to feel psychological remorse over a whole universe of activities and thoughts that had previously escaped normalization and institutional castigation. The bilingual guides for confessors were a critical part of this proselytizing strategy: at the level of tactics, they permitted even the most ignorant rural priest access to the everyday mysteries of the enigmatic communities in their charge, in or beyond the confessional. The manuals contained the code by which the Christian register of culpability and punishment could be translated into a practice of control and domination. These guides played an important role in the colonization project not because they were read to all the Indians, not because the natives visited the confessional regularly, nor because these always sought to heed the words of their confessor. The manuals were important because they provided

[30] *Ibid.*, fols. 42v, 43r.
[31] *Ibid.*, fol. 43v.
[32] *Ibid.*, fols. 43v-44v.

the code for an extremely intimate and comprehensive mode of coercion that took hold of the individual body, family, and community in places otherwise inaccessible to the colonial powers. The confessional seconded secular control by regulating all social relations through the instilling of moral obligations between family members, families and officials, workers, workers and officials, workers and employers, employers and officials, and of every individual to the Church and Hispanic culture by pointing invariably to Spanish officialdom as the ultimate source of secular authority and justice, and to Hispanic culture as the ultimate arbiter of human customs, mores, and tastes. Whatever protection the humble natives received at the hands of the confessors, the manuals never went so far as to question the legitimacy of Spanish authority or the primacy of Hispanic culture. Rather, the guides formed a part of the colonial technology of power by legitimating the Christian and Hispanic worlds and by transforming these into the sole domains of common sense and moral propriety. The importance of this in the colonization project cannot be exaggerated.