Creation of a civilization in South Texas long ago: Indigenous were spiritual, but came slowly to Christianity

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When San Antonio Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller celebrates Mass this afternoon on the grounds of Mission San José during World Heritage Site celebrations, he will be re-enacting religious rituals that would have been foreign to the 18th-century nomadic people of Yanaguana.

Too little is known of their indigenous religiosity, says historian Frank de la Teja of Texas State University, given that we can rely only on “what the missionaries had to say.” But it’s safe to surmise that these original Texans, whose roots here stretch back at least 10,000 years, were spiritual people.

They saw the divine in all their surroundings, though Spanish missionaries would have seen them as “godless, because they didn’t believe in the one true God,” de la Teja said. Converting them and making them subjects of the crown were among the goals of conquest and colonization.

In Central Texas, the natives from which missionaries recruited were unusually open to mission life. But historians say the draw wasn’t Christianity. Food scarcity and insecurity were on their minds. They faced threats from more powerful groups, such as the Apaches and Comanches. Whether entering a mission was “complete free-will understanding of what was expected of them is a different matter,” de la Teja said.

Historian Gilberto Hinojosa of the University of the Incarnate Word agreed. Baptism wasn’t a commitment; “it was another opportunity,” he said.

Mission Indians might be best described by a term now applied to people who embrace some but not all of the church’s doctrines. “You can say they were cafeteria Catholics,” Hinojosa said. “They accepted some things and not others. With the passage of time, some were permanent residents (of the missions) and faithful churchgoers.”

Early on, however, Native Americans considered the missions temporary residences, and friars complained of their comings and goings. In that, they kept alive forms of spirituality, barred in missions, that were viewed as paganism, animism or, worse, devil worship by the Spanish.

Hinojosa said the indigenous continued to celebrate rituals described by friars as mitotes, their word for the spiritual dances they had seen in Central Mexico. Mescal beans were used by mission Indians, too, Hinojosa said, to experience “a sense of ecstasy” and “a sense of the divine - these rituals allowed them to be in touch with nature and transcend oneself.”

While they quickly adopted clothing in winter or European metal tools, conversion to Catholicism took generations. Missionaries used a full repertoire of tactics, including singing and stories of faith and holy people. Some Indians found liturgical acts and presentations “awe-inspiring,” Hinojosa said. “These are things that appealed to them and attracted them to the new faith.”

Friars also focused on native children, speaking to them only in Spanish and teaching them catechism in hopes of quicker indoctrination. They often separated children from their parents, too.

Hinojosa said there’s no doubt that missionaries also saw Central Texas natives as “indios barbaros,” barbaric Indians, and less sophisticated than Central Mexican groups in which even Spaniards recognized well-developed societal, economic, cultural or religious systems.
Though they decimated a society, missionaries “believed they were bringing in something better for Native Americans, providing more secure resources by teaching them how to farm,” Hinojosa said, as well as “bringing the light of the Gospel.”

In time, many of those the missionaries hoped to convert were dead from European diseases against which they had no immunity. Those who survived became incorporated into the Spanish and Tejano communities. Descendants say some just went into hiding - in plain sight, within Tejano and Mexican-American populations.

For better or worse, said historian Gerald Poyo of St. Mary's University, the Spanish and the indigenous people “together created this settlement, this place that was open to new immigrants like the Canary Islanders, the Anglos and the Mexicans. It's an example of the creation of these civilizations in the Southwest.”

San Antonian Isaac Cardenas, who's both Catholic and a member of the Native American Church, has mixed feelings about World Heritage Site celebrations and what was lost amid Spanish colonization and evangelization.

A member of the Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan tribe who works for its nonprofit agency, the American Indians in Texas at the Spanish Colonial Missions, Cardenas believes indigenous culture and spirituality are being recovered. “People are looking at spirituality in a different way. Now the strangers,” he says of the non-indigenous, “are adapting.”

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