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

*Elaine Ayala*

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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