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PART 2. JESUIT MISSIONS IN SOUTH AMERICA

By ALFRED MÉTRAUX

Anthropology owes a debt of gratitude to the Jesuits, who wrote so many excellent descriptions of the cultures of the South American Indians whom they converted. Their achievements in the field of linguistics were particularly impressive. They wrote "artes," catechisms, and dictionaries of countless Indian languages and dialects; the classification of South American linguistic families is still based to a large extent on Jesuit documents. At the end of the 18th century, Hervás, one of the Jesuits, compiled the material collected by his fellow missionaries and wrote the first textbook of South American languages.

The missionary work of the Jesuits was a decisive event in the history of many Indian tribes. In a little more than 250 years, the Jesuits extended their domination over the tribes of the upper Amazon, eastern Bolivia, the Province of Chiquitos, the Chaco, Paraguay, and the Pampas, while their colleagues in Brazil converted the Indians of the Atlantic Coast and of the lower Amazon. The expansion of the Jesuit missions was the equivalent of a "conquest," but it was truly a "spiritual conquest," for one of their cardinal principles was that they should never resort to the use of force.

The Jesuit missionaries were, as a rule, chosen with care. They were well trained and had irreproachable moral standards, great courage, and an excellent scholastic background. Thanks to their energy, intelligence, and skill, they succeeded better in their missionary efforts than any other religious order. In their well-organized missions the natives rapidly assimilated European culture and were safe from exploitation and want. These missions may well serve as examples of reasonable and humane colonization, for in spirit they were far ahead of their time. Faults and misconceptions that are apparent from a modern point of view resulted more from the ideas of that time than from any base motives. If too much virtue was expected of the natives, if their lives were too enmeshed in vain religious formalism, it was largely because the Jesuits wanted their neophytes to approximate as nearly as possible Christian perfection as they themselves conceived it. The prosperity and relative autonomy

of the Jesuit missions excited the jealousy of the encomenderos, who, from the beginning, exposed them to calumny and attack. The Jesuits answered the encomenderos in order to justify their system and achievements. The controversies are responsible for a considerable literature that contains a great wealth of information on the missions and their history. As the Jesuits wielded a powerful influence in many great European countries in the 17th and 18th centuries, the polemics attracted public attention to the South American missions. The Jesuits "Lettres édifiantes et curieuses" and histories were widely read both by people who were interested in exotic countries and by philosophers who were curious about other types of mankind. Those who were involved in controversies about the primitive condition of men and the origin of institutions drew extensively on the Jesuit reports. As the Jesuits had been more successful in the 30 missions of *Guaraní* Indians of the middle and upper Paraguay and Uruguay Rivers than in any other part of South America, all persons who, for one reason or another, are concerned with the Jesuit missions have focused attention on those of Paraguay.

METHODS USED BY THE JESUITS TO FORM THEIR MISSIONS

Though enemies of the Company of Jesus attributed the success of the Fathers to the use of armed force, there are few instances in which missionaries relied on troops to compel the Indians to accept their authority. As a matter of policy, their method of persuasion was by peaceful means. It was also a basic Jesuit policy to consider first the temporal needs of those whom they wished to convert.

Typically, one or two missionaries, followed by a small group of Indians, traveled to a tribe and there won friends by giving the natives presents of iron tools and miscellaneous goods. For this reason the missionaries usually were granted the hospitality that traders enjoyed in many regions. Later, after gaining the confidence of the Indians, the Fathers endeavored to persuade them to settle in a new village where they would be under the care of a missionary and would be amply provided with iron tools. So great was the desire of the Indians for axes and knives that in many cases they were willing enough to relinquish their liberty for a constant supply of tools. The Indians also were drawn into missions by the hope that, under the protection of the Fathers, they would enjoy a bountiful existence free from want. Another major reason for the Jesuits' success was the Indians' fear of enslavement by Spanish raiders. Indians who had suffered from such raids believed that only the missionaries could save them from total extermination.

After the Jesuits had succeeded in establishing a mission they enlarged their field of action by visiting neighboring tribes accompanied

by neophytes. When a tribe remained hostile and obstinately refused to deal with them, the Jesuits would resort to another stratagem. Accompanied by a group of Christian Indians, they would kidnap a few members of the pagan tribe and carry them off to a distant mission, where they were well treated and instructed in the mysteries of the faith. After a few years the captives were released and sent home loaded with presents. In most cases these converts became valuable intermediaries between the missionaries and their fellow tribesmen.

The aboriginal dispersion and the inimical relations of different tribes were the main obstacles to good organization. The Jesuits always endeavored to gather as many people as possible in a single mission, but the Indians generally were reluctant to leave their own territory. Sometimes enemy tribes were brought together in a single mission, but it soon became obvious that this was a dangerous procedure, for the hostile groups would accuse each other of practicing witchcraft and would often engage in pitched battles (e. g., in the missions of the Marañón River). Consequently, the Fathers were obliged to multiply the number of their missions against their will and better judgment.

POLITICAL ORGANIZATION OF THE MISSIONS

In the political organization of the missions, the Jesuits followed the *Leyes de Indias*¹ which prescribed that native villages should be administered as far as possible in the same manner as Spanish towns.

The dignity of the native chiefs, caciques, was retained even though their power was curtailed. The land of the missions was apportioned to the various caciques who, with their people, formed the settlement and were the nominal owners of the fields cultivated by their followers. According to the Spanish law, the caciques and their sons were exempt from tribute, a right that in 1657 was denied to the *Guaraní* caciques over the protests of the missionaries. In 1697 the caciques were assimilated to Spanish petty nobility and were treated like *hidalgos*, who could carry a sword. They were given a place of honor at church, were exempt from tribute and had the privilege of having their own fields cultivated by their "vassals," who, moreover, were obliged to show them obedience and respect. Caciques never were publicly reprimanded or punished. Since a mission generally was formed by several Indian communities, the number of caciques in a single reduction was sometimes very large (e. g., in 1715 in the Mission of San Ignacio there were 57 caciques). Generally, the mission officials were chosen from among the caciques.

The village itself was divided into burroughs (*cuarteles*) where the

¹ *Recopilación de Leyes de los Reynos de las Indias* (1681).

caciques resided. Each burrough was under the direction of a varista (see below).

The mission was "ruled" by a municipal council (cabildo) over which presided a corregidor. All the members of the cabildo, with the exception of the corregidor, changed annually on the first of January. The members of the new cabildo were designated or elected by the old one and had to be approved by the missionary and the governor.

The corregidor, who was selected by the missionary and confirmed by the governor, represented local civil authority; his tenure was probably for life. He was the highest magistrate and enjoyed no little authority and prestige. He was exempt from tribute. In his absence, the *teniente corregidor* was his substitute.

Also in the cabildo were two *alcaldes*, who were administrators, judges, and policemen, but who could not impose the death sentence. They acted as foremen in the supervision of communal work. The *alcaldes de la hermandad* had the same duties, but their jurisdiction was restricted to country districts.

The *alférez real* was the king's standard bearer in the community and had a seat in the council after the *alcaldes*.

The *regidores*, who were subordinate police officers without definite functions, completed the number of voting members of the council.

All the officers enumerated above were known as *varistas* because of the staff (*vara*) which they wore as a symbol of their rank.

The *alguazil mayor* was the general factotum of the council, but not a member. The council also had a secretary who kept the books and records.

The communal lands were under the supervision of a *majordomo* (*mayor domo del pueblo*), who was not a member of the council. He was assisted by "*contadores, fiscales, and almaceneros.*"

The several groups of artisans—weavers, carpenters, etc.—and teachers were likewise under the supervision of minor officials called *fiscales* or *alcaldes*, who reported on their activities to the Fathers.

Native officials received no salary.

Despite this array of functionaries, the real power in the reduction remained in the hands of the missionaries. In each mission there were at least two priests: one, the *cura*, was the administrator and manager, and the other, the *vicario* or *compañero*, took care of the spiritual welfare of the community. No cabildo dared to challenge their authority. The members of the cabildo were obliged to report to the *cura* in the most minute detail the events that took place in the village. The Fathers also were kept informed by children, who were expected to tell them all the sins they had observed or heard about. A tightly knit spy system enabled the *cura* to keep his neophytes well in hand.

Punishments.—The Fathers themselves were the real arbiters in quarrels. Punishments generally consisted of: Flogging on the rollo, a pillar in the middle of the plaza. After being flogged, the Indian kissed the hand of the missionary and thanked him. Some wrongdoers were put in jail in the cepo. Heinous crimes (sorcery) were punished by jail terms and expulsion from the community.

THE PLAN OF JESUIT MISSIONS

Appearance of the mission.—All Jesuit missions were built more or less on one plan, which was that of a Spanish town. In the center there was a large square plaza where stood the church, the house or college of the Fathers, the schools, the hospital, the storehouses, the guest house (tambo), and the house of the secluded women. The Indians' dwellings were disposed in parallel lines along streets running at right angles to one another. The houses were long, with walls of adobe or wattle-and-daub. Each was divided into apartments for single families. In the 18th century, stone was widely used in some missions not only for public buildings but also for the houses of the Indians. The Jesuits strongly objected to the communal houses of the Indians and soon introduced individual dwellings made of stone or adobe with tile covered roofs. Around each house was a porch supported by pillars.

Education.—In each reduction there was a school for boys and another for girls. The more gifted children, especially the sons of caciques and members of the cabildo, were taught reading, writing, and the elements of arithmetic. The most intelligent learned some Spanish and even some Latin, though their knowledge of the latter did not go beyond correct reading and pronunciation. Those with manual skills were admitted into workshops where, at an early age, they were trained in various handicrafts and arts.

The Jesuits, especially those who had come from Austria, attached great importance to music. Visitors to the missions declared that the songs heard at mass compared favorably with those sung in European cathedrals. The Indians went to work accompanied by music and returned in the evening in processions led by flute players and other musicians.

Agriculture.—When the Indians were gathered in a mission they were grouped according to their band or family allegiances, whichever was the normal social unit. Land was then assigned to the 20 or more caciques usually found in a mission, each of whom, in accordance with Spanish law, exercised right of eminent domain over his share. Actually, the cacique divided much of his tract of land among the several families under him for their individual use. A newly wed couple received a plot which they cultivated for their own needs.

Fields assigned to those engaged in industrial work and to those who served in the local militia were tilled by others, as were the particular fields of the cacique himself. In Paraguay, the land worked by a family was called *abambae*. Sowing and planting took place between the feast of Corpus Christi and Christmas; during this time everyone, even the artisans, worked in the fields.

Policemen, the *alcaldes*, saw to it that every family cultivated a plot larger than they would have had in premissionary times. Lazy persons were flogged. These provisions were precautionary measures to insure a surplus in case of famine or public distress and for purposes of trade by the Indians.

After the harvest, each family kept enough food for 2 or 3 months and stored the rest in communal granaries in bags which were marked with their name and were their exclusive property. The Jesuits justified this procedure by pointing out the improvidence of the Indians who, careless of lean months ahead, consumed their food as soon as it was garnered. By confiscating part of their crops, the missionaries imposed some restraint on them and helped them to develop a sense of economy. Even so, the Indians often ran short of food before the end of the year, so that the missionaries had to supplement their meager diet with the products of the *tupambae*.

The *tupambae*, or God's acre, was always one of the best pieces of land in the community. Communally tilled and exploited, the existence of these plots is the prime evidence of Jesuit collectivism. In some cases the *tupambae* was cultivated by the whole community on Saturdays and Mondays as a social service and a work of charity. In other cases it was cared for by a group of expert gardeners who were then paid out of the community chest, for which the *tupambae* itself was the main provision. The yield of the field was used to pay officials and messengers, and to support cripples, orphans, and other indigents. As a last resort, the communal harvest was distributed when famine afflicted the mission; sometimes part of the crops were sent to other distressed communities in the area.

The cattle herds of the mission formed part of the *tupambae*; i. e., they were the common property of the settlement. Some missions in Uruguay owned more than 400,000 head of cattle, which provided endless supplies of meat. It is said that sometimes as many as 20,000 head were brought back from a round-up of wild cattle. Cows were not milked. Oxen were given to the Indians to plough the fields, but the Fathers complained that they were neglected and also that the Indians never showed any willingness to raise cattle for their own use. At that time in Argentina and Uruguay, the half-wild herds were exploited by the Indians and *gauchos* very much as the buffalo were by the Plains Indians in North America.

The yerba maté collections also belonged to the tupambae and formed one of the main sources of money income for the missions. Every year groups of Indians were sent to the field to collect the leaves of the tree, which they roasted on the spot and transported back in skin bags. The expeditions, which occupied the Indians for 3 or 4 months during the year, were fraught with danger, although the Jesuits took great precautions to avoid hardship and loss of life. Part of the maté was consumed in the mission; the remainder was exported. The Jesuit maté was in wide demand for it was justly considered to be superior to other brands. The *Guaraní* Indians were extremely fond of maté and a daily ration was distributed to each family in the mission.

The Jesuits tried hard, and on the whole successfully, to improve native agriculture and to introduce new plants, such as rice, wheat, flax, and many other European species. They were particularly successful with oranges, which even today are one of the main products of the regions which they colonized. They succeeded by the end of their domination in cultivating bushes of maté in the missions, an art that was lost after their expulsion.

Industries.—The Jesuits spared no efforts to introduce various industries into the missions. They were rewarded by the Indians' readiness to accept all the innovations and their skill in many arts. These industries were taught by the missionaries themselves, many of whom were German, Austrian, or Dutch lay brothers who spent several years in the missions.

Father Sepp enumerated the following craftsmen in the mission of San Juan (founded in 1697): Brickmakers, carpenters, stone carvers, bakers, cooks, butchers, tanners, potters, joiners, goldsmiths, sculptors, painters, and various kinds of musicians. He adds that many European towns were not so well provided with technicians. Another Jesuit wrote in 1719, "We can hardly think of a craft which is not performed in our towns, so that we do not need outside help." Other artisans found in the missions besides those listed by Sepp were: Silversmiths, coopers, cartwrights, hatters, gilders, and house painters. With the help of *Guaraní* workers, the Jesuits even succeeded in making watches. They also introduced printing shops. In Loreto in 1705, Father Serrano printed an abbreviated *Guaraní* version of the "Temporal y eterno," by Father Nieremberg. Many works on religion, linguistics, and astronomy (almanacs) were published in the *Guaraní* missions.

Weaving was one of the main industries. Every week the women received some raw cotton and were obliged to return a certain amount of spun thread a week later. The spun cotton was then given to weavers, who made cloth for the community and for sale. Their salary was 6 yards of cloth. By the same system, wool was spun and woven.

Trade.—The products of the mission, especially maté, cloth, and skins, were taken to Santa Fe and Buenos Aires and there sold for money with which to pay tribute, or they were traded for goods needed in the mission, e. g., ornaments for feasts or for the church, salt, iron tools, etc. The Indians who had a surplus could sell it for their own benefit.

Private property.—Furniture, utensils, tools, and articles which the Indians made or bought with the work of their hands were their individual property. The crops harvested from their own fields also belonged to them. Some Indians sold their own yerba maté or their own sugar, but this was rare. Houses were owned during the lifetime of the inmates. Land, however, was not inherited. Some well-meaning but uninformed persons have made much of this fact, forgetting that in the Tropics under primitive conditions of cultivation, land has little intrinsic value, because after 3 or 4 years of use the soil is so exhausted that a new clearing must be opened elsewhere.

COMMUNISM IN THE MISSIONS

The economic system of the Paraguayan Jesuits has been alternately attacked and praised as an attempt of the missionaries to realize a communistic society. Some writers saw in these missions the return to the golden age of Christianity. Montesquieu thought that the Jesuit system had been inspired by Plato's Republic, while other writers believed its organization had been influenced by Campanella. The Jesuits themselves always have taken great pains to deny the validity of these parallels and, indeed, when closely examined they are both superficial and misleading. The Jesuits had no desire to create a communistic state; on the contrary, they did their best to develop a sense of individual property among the Indians by encouraging them to plant a surplus to trade in the Spanish towns and by giving them cattle to build up herds of their own. Moreover, the Indians had considerable private property in the form of tools, ornaments, etc. Nor did the Jesuits foster equality among the Indians; instead, they established an aristocracy. The Fathers explained that the "communal" system prevailing in their missions developed either under stress of local cultural conditions or in conformity with the *Leyes de Indias*.² The system of land tenure was based partly on a *Guaraní* tradition that went back to pre-European times and partly on the exigencies of the situation and the need for special surplus stocks of food. In the past as in mission days each Indian community owned fields or clearings opened by the work of the whole community. The only novelty in the missions was the use to which the *tupambae* was put; a community chest of this

² See footnote 1, p. 647.

kind was necessary in an agricultural community that was, nevertheless, partly dependent on a money economy. What does give the missions a socialistic flavor is the method of control of production and distributions of consumers' goods, but the Jesuits insisted that they adopted this policy only as a precaution against the Indians' incurable improvidence. The sharing of dwellings, which the Jesuits in fact tried to abolish, was no novelty to the *Guaraní*, who in pre-Hispanic times had customarily lived in big communal houses.

The whole system was so well adapted to the missions founded by the Jesuits that after their expulsion the Spaniards were obliged to retain it in spite of several decisions made to destroy it. When the so-called communistic features of the mission villages were finally abolished in 1848, the situation of the Indians did not improve, but rather deteriorated. Many features of the Jesuit organization are in our day approved by persons who have to deal with modern Indians on the same cultural level as the *Guaraní* of Jesuit times.