

## Indigenous Agency in the Americas throughout the Late 16th and Early 17th Centuries

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### Abstract

This literature review explored the emergence and evolution of hybrid cultures from the rise of the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution in the 16th century. It examined how European pursuits of exploration and trade, beginning with Portugal's maritime route to India and Spain's exploration of the "New World," propelled Europe into an era of colonization. This review highlighted the economic partnerships and religious opportunities that facilitated cultural exchanges, emphasizing the agency indigenous peoples maintained despite colonial pressures. By analyzing the profound impact of colonialism, including forced conversions, cultural destruction, and resistance, the review revealed how indigenous peoples navigated and negotiated their roles, contributing to the formation of hybrid cultures. These interactions created opportunities for social and political advancement, leaving enduring impacts on language, culture, and music. The study also suggested future research into the religious aspects of hybrid cultures in North America, focusing on conversion efforts and their influence on local hybrid cultures.

*Keywords: Hybrid Cultures, Indigenous Peoples, European Exploration, Cultural Hybridization*

### 1. Introduction

During the late 16th and early 17th centuries, Europeans and Indigenous people, those who inhabited the Americas before European explorers first landed there, “accommodated” each other's customs and religious practices in a new culture known as a “hybrid culture.” These hybrid cultures, as described in the book *Of the People* by Michael McGerr (2019), formed a “middle ground,” a culture that was “neither fully European nor fully [Indigenous].” Instead, these were new cultures that incorporated aspects of both worlds. Europeans and Indigenous people formed these when they couldn't, at that moment, reach their objectives through forceful means, as they were effective in doing so peacefully. When Europeans found themselves in positions where force was the most optimal route to achieving their objectives, they used it, as can be seen in the Spanish Conquest. In the Spanish Conquest, as well as in other conflicts, the indigenous peoples fiercely fought back against their European aggressors. However, when force wasn't used by Europeans (for many reasons), they formed hybrid cultures, which granted power and authority to Indigenous people over the Europeans, as the French and Spanish, the main countries that formed hybrid cultures with Indigenous peoples, heavily relied on them to survive and accomplish certain goals regarding religious conversion or trade.

At the dawn of the 16th century, the ideas of the Renaissance, which rebirthed the classical (ancient Greek and Roman) arts and ways of thinking, sprouted a newfound curiosity about the world around the Europeans. Triggered by advancements in technology during the Scientific Revolution, such as ship construction and navigation, European elites and monarchs began to view the sea as a promising avenue for trade (Adelman et al., 2021). After the collapse of the Silk Road in the 15th century, elites desired to obtain spices and silk from Asia, while monarchs rushed to establish profitable trade routes to accumulate wealth for their nations under the economic system of mercantilism.

The widespread economic theory suggested that global wealth was finite and that nations had to prioritize prosperity within their borders (ED Editors, n.d.). This led to the notion that a country needed to colonize lands and limit foreign competition to enhance its strength. This concept would significantly characterize the era as Europeans entered a new phase of maritime exploration that ultimately brought them into contact with the New World. This confluence of exploration and colonial ambitions set the stage for the profound interactions between Europeans and Indigenous peoples.

The primary objective of this research was to explore and analyze the dynamics of cultural hybridization, the process by which different cultures fuse together - between Indigenous peoples and European settlers during the colonization period in the Americas. It aimed to understand the processes through which these diverse groups interacted, adapted, and integrated aspects of each other's cultures, thereby contributing to the emergence of hybrid cultures.

## **2. Maritime expeditions and contact with the New World**

The first impetus was led by the Portuguese, who were searching for a maritime route to India; however, the strong winds and currents hindered explorers from moving beyond Cape Bojador, as the fear of never returning had also immobilized them. Nevertheless, in 1434, Gil Eannes managed to surpass the Cape and subsequently used the Atlantic wind system to return home. This breakthrough led to several more expeditions, culminating in Portugal's Vasco da Gama, whose 1497-1499 voyage was the first to travel from Europe to India (Campbell & Fernandez-Armesto, n.d.). These breakthroughs exacerbated the pre-existing rivalry between Portugal and its Iberian counterpart, Spain, which lagged significantly behind. Therefore, when Christopher Columbus approached King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain with a proposed plan to sail westward instead of eastward, after persistent requests, they ultimately decided to take a risk and finance his voyage in 1492. When he returned the following year, he brought news that he had landed on islands off the coast of India, which later turned out to be islands in the Caribbean (Adelman et al., 2021). This investment by the King and Queen led to the kingdom planning to conquer the "New World" - an unforeseen development for them.

Moving into the mid and late 16th century, the competition to colonize the "New World" became intense among European powers, notably France, Britain, Spain, and Portugal. France focused on establishing colonies in North America, specifically in areas that would become Canada and the Great Lakes region. French explorers and settlers, such as Samuel de Champlain, relied heavily on forming alliances with Indigenous peoples, such as the Huron and Algonquin, for survival, trade, and military support. These alliances were critical for navigating the vast and challenging landscapes and for the fur trade, which became a cornerstone of the French colonial economy. The French engaged in the fur trade, which required extensive cooperation with Indigenous trappers and traders. This dependence on Indigenous expertise not only fostered economic ties but also led to cultural exchanges, including intermarriage between French settlers and Indigenous women, which strengthened alliances and facilitated social integration.

Similarly, Spanish colonization efforts in Central and South America were marked by the establishment of missions and encomiendas. Spanish missionaries, such as the Jesuits, played a significant role in converting Indigenous populations to Christianity. The Guaraní missions in Paraguay, for example, became centers of cultural and religious hybridization where Indigenous people were introduced to European agricultural practices, crafts, and religious rituals. The Jesuit missionary José Cardiel's accounts describe the active participation of Guaraní people in these missions, highlighting their agency and adaptability in adopting and reshaping European customs to fit their own cultural contexts.

## **3. French hybrid Cultures with the indigenous**

In North America, French colonists relied on the knowledge and population of the Indigenous people for the survival of the colonies in New France, both physically and economically. This dependence gave a form of power to the Indigenous population. One image (Figure 1) depicts a Canadian woman wearing a combination of European and Indigenous clothing, such as moccasins, Native-style leggings, a European skirt, and a bodice. Moccasins and Native-

style leggings display the French reliance on Indigenous peoples for clothing made up of local materials necessary for survival, as clothing is crucial for safeguarding the body. Another image (Figure 2) by the French depicts a woodsman, or *coureur de bois*, wearing snowshoes (a traditional indigenous garment) along with European attire and a hat (Smithsonian, 2023). The use of indigenous clothing by the French was widespread, highlighting its importance and giving power to the Indigenous peoples who knew how to make these clothes. The French highly valued trade with the Indigenous peoples, recognizing its money-making potential. This mutual value of trade between the French and the indigenous people put them on relatively equal footing. The power dynamic sometimes shifted towards the Indigenous peoples, as seen in an address by Otreouti, an orator for one of the Iroquois tribes, demanding that the French and its allies respect their territory for hunting beavers (Otreouti, 2003). The French depended on the Indigenous population for the beaver trade and the knowledge of it, allowing them to demand compliance with their rules.

Additionally, in *Born in Blood and Fire*, author John



Figure 2. A French Canadian Wearing Snow Shoes in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century (Green, 1893)

Charles Chasteen mentioned that both the French and the Indigenous people valued

mixed marriages, with the French seeing them as a way to strengthen trade relationships (Chasteen, 2016). The French valued mixed marriages for trading reasons because the offspring would be integrated into the trading system, enhancing its productivity, as well as providing the mixed offspring with a higher social status, increasing their social mobility and influence. An example of this is the “Voyageurs,” who worked in the fur trade as transporters of goods. They often married Indigenous women, which strengthened their bonds and ties to Indigenous networks. Additionally, over time, these marriages would start to blur the line between cultures, resulting in the ability for “mixed” children and even their parents to achieve social mobility within society.

However, with these strong connections between certain Indigenous populations and the French, it is important to recognize that another aspect was intertwined with the fur trade: slavery. Indigenous peoples often held captives from battles, which resulted, when the French sought a supply of enslaved peoples, in a surge of Indigenous attacks on other Indigenous populations for the sole purpose of obtaining captives. This was exacerbated by the transatlantic slave trade, which drove this practice to “unprecedented levels.”

#### 4. Spanish hybrid Cultures with the indigenous

The Spanish had strong religious motivation in Latin America to form hybrid cultures, giving the Indigenous peoples influence and social advancement. The religious conversions of the Spanish can be found in the Guaraní missions, where Jesuit missionary José Cardiel describes Indigenous people participating in various Catholic religious activities organized by the missionaries (Caridel, 2016). The Guaraní missions and the effort the Spanish (and missionaries) put in to establish a village to convert Indigenous people demonstrate the importance of Indigenous people to Spanish endeavors (possibly pleasing the Church in Europe). In the same mission, Jesuit missionary José



Figure 1. Inhabitants of Detroit, 1779 (Smithsonian, 2023)

Cardiel also described the way indigenous people danced during religious events, stating that the Europeans should follow the Indigenous practices over what he considers to be “scandalous” current practices (Caridel, 2016). The account of the dancing shows the positive perceptions of Indigenous people and suggests that they were even superior to some Europeans, which explains why the Spanish persisted in converting the Indigenous population. Another example of the importance of Indigenous people to Spanish religious endeavors is the incorporation of the Virgin of Guadalupe (an Indigenous goddess) into the Christian faith in colonial North and South America (Chasteen, 2016). By accepting the Virgin of Guadalupe as part of the Christian religion, the Spanish demonstrated their eagerness to make the religion more familiar to the Indigenous population to achieve more conversions and highlight Indigenous culture within the religion. Finally, the story of Kateri Tekakwitha, a famous Indigenous woman who willingly converted to the Christian faith and lived as a devout Christian according to the confessor’s writings after her death, exemplifies the placement of indigenous culture and people in religion (Cholonec, 2019). The story of Kateri’s conversion and devout life, made famous in the Christian faith, underscores the Spanish’s eagerness to convert the population by presenting a willingly converted Indigenous woman as a role model and elevating her story to attract conversions. The use of Kateri also reinforces the idea that the Indigenous population played a significant role in Spanish religious endeavors, granting them social mobility and influence.

However, when religious conversion was not achieved through these means, the Spanish resorted to violent and forced conversions, as with the story of the Genízaro Pueblo of Abiquiú who lived in New Mexico. The Spanish purchased captives from surrounding tribes and often used violent means to convert them to Catholicism and to “re-educate” or “detribalize” them. These efforts have lasting impacts on the cultural and religious practices of the peoples who were forcibly converted (and even those not), which have persisted for centuries into the modern day.

In a period of colonization and conquest in the Americas, Indigenous people often retained a degree of agency due to European reliance on them, granting them power in the shifting dynamics. This study reveals that even in situations where it might seem unlikely for one to hold power, there were individuals who managed to do so.

## 5. Conclusion

The study highlighted the importance of Indigenous agency in colonial North and South America, where European dependence on indigenous knowledge and resources gave power and authority to the Indigenous populations. The French and Spanish efforts in forming hybrid cultures through religious conversions further exemplify the significant role of Indigenous peoples in shaping these societies. Despite political turmoil during the Latin American revolutions, these hybrid cultures remained strong, offering pathways for social and political mobility.

Future research into the religious aspects of hybrid cultures outside Central and South America is suggested to further understand the influence of conversion efforts on local hybrid cultures. The document emphasizes the resilience and agency of Indigenous peoples in a historical context of colonization and conquest.

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