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## **Colonial Masca in motion: tactics of persistence of a Honduran indigenous community**

Sheptak, R.N.

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**Author:** Sheptak, Russell Nicholas

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## Chapter 9: Assembling the Pieces

Masca, later Candelaria, exemplifies the experiences of pueblos de indios in the northern Ulúa Valley that persisted from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. The people of Candelaria identified with a local community as defined by the presence of their houses, church, agricultural fields, and cacao plantations. This community originally spoke a Lenca language scholars have called Toquegua whose use persisted in the community through the mid-seventeenth century. Their decision to use Spanish after this point did not affect their sense of community.

The community of Candelaria used a variety of tactics to persist in the colony. These included understanding and exploiting the colonial legal system to achieve community goals, the continued use of indigenous family names by community elites, moving the entire community to avoid violence, and exploiting the casta system to change the perceived identity of individuals including those from other casta groups marrying into the community.

Indian communities in the Ulúa Valley of Honduras underwent a population collapse during the sixteenth century. Those communities that persisted from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries were able to rebuild population throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and even into the nineteenth century.

At the scale of the valley a network of pueblos de indios integrated themselves in colonial society through service in a coastal watch, while resisting exploitation beyond the legal requirements of encomienda. The network of pueblos de indios of which Candelaria was a part served to perpetuate indigenous practices, most notably the cultivation, circulation, and use of cacao, likely for ritual purposes. The continued use of chipped stone tools by pueblos de indios in this network implies the persistence of exchange networks between pueblos de indios. The known circulation of people as in-marriage spouses among these pueblos de indios allowed for both the persistence of population and a sharing of colonial experiences. Successful tactics of persistence likely circulated between communities through these flows of people.

The viability of Spanish jurisdictions like San Pedro Sula and later Omoa depended on pueblos de indios. This is most visible in their service in the coastal watch, which they repeatedly cited as the basis for consideration of legal claims presented by the people of Candelaria/Masca. Especially in the later colonial period it is evident that the pueblos de indios exploited the possibilities for commerce created by conflict between European powers.

Pueblos de indios participated in the receipt of contraband shipments, which would have given them access to a broad, range of European goods, especially high value consumables such as sugar, wine, and oil that are highlighted in so many contraband cases. It also provided access to European clothing, necessary for the transformation from indio to ladino.

Pueblos de indios participated in the broader Spanish colonial economy beyond their participation in networks of contraband goods. After the end of the encomienda system in the 1690s, pueblos de indios were able to use Spanish merchants as buyers for cultivated products like cacao and gathered plants like sarsaparilla.

In common with other parts of the Spanish colonial world, distance from administrative centers and the presence of external threats may have provided more opportunities for residents of the pueblos de indios in the Ulúa valley to negotiate their position in the colony.

Simon Cuculi, alcalde of Candelaria in 1714, identified the important things that made up the town when he wrote: "we are settled with houses, church, cacao groves, plantain fields, corn fields, and other and cultivated fields and plantings...[estamos poblados con casas, yglesia, cacaguatales, platanales, milpas, y otros sembrados y plantios]" (1714 AGCA A1.45.6 Legajo 368 Expediente 3413, pages 15-16). Earlier, in talking about the town's first move, to the Río Bijao, Cuculi wrote something similar: "and being settled with houses, church, and with some gardens and fields planted...[Y estando poblado con casas, yglesia, y formadas unas guertas y sembrados]" (AGCA A1.45.6 Legajo 368 Expediente 3413, page 15). The repetition, houses then church followed by agricultural fields, reiterates what made Candelaria a place with which its occupants could identify. As they moved in from the coast, they remade their town in full, first at the Río Bijao, and then four leagues further south. In the process they moved their houses, church, agricultural fields, and established new cacao plantations, a process that literally takes years. Their investment in replanting cacao, in particular, demonstrates their values, rooted in a tradition of supplying cacao to the other people of Honduras who were not as fortunate as they were to live where cacao can be cultivated. That cacao from the mountains behind Omoa and around Choloma is still used today for agricultural ritual in central Honduran Lenca communities, as documented by Anne Chapman (1985:77), demonstrates the importance of this connection to other communities in Honduras. Nor was growing of cacao to benefit others unique to Candelaria. The leaders of Jetegua specifically mention that after they moved into the southern Ulúa Valley, they returned to their original town location to continue harvesting cacao until their new plantations were producing.

Indigenous people in Candelaria were either "naturales" meaning "born there", or "forasteros" meaning "stranger", "alien". The distinction was important for calculating things like tribute and fees, and governed the right to participate in the decision making of the community. At the same time the circulation of people between communities, both in and out marriages, became part of a tactic (perhaps even a strategy) to boost community population.

Candelaria (or originally Masca) formed part of the set of communities identified by anthropologists, geographers, and historians as Toquegua, though there is no evidence that the people in these towns shared a uniform identity at this regional scale that would approximate the kind of ethnicity suggested when Toquegua is treated as the name of a people. Speaking a specific language would not have been a requirement of identity for those in the community of Candelaria. With a long history of participating in face-to-face meetings with speakers of a variety of languages before the Spanish arrived, the community of Candelaria had developed an identity focused on the community and its outside relations. As a community engaged in long distance face to face exchange with Lenca, Yucatecan, Chol, and perhaps even Nahautl speakers, at least some members of the community must have been polyglot, and the community as a whole was multilingual. The presence of "Chi" as a family name in the community reinforces the account of Landa that some Yucatecan families had agents living in the Ulúa region to acquire cacao. "Chi" is a family name common in Yucatan, but uncommon outside of it, except in this part of Honduras. Residence of speakers of other native tongues would have consequently been a normal part of life in prehispanic Masca.

Through the mid seventeenth century translators were present when colonial authorities interact with the community. This does not by itself mean no one in the community spoke, or understood Spanish, but rather that no colonial authority recognized that they did. Our last evidence of the use of a translator is in the 1662 assumption of the encomienda of Masca by Alonso de Osaguera. Shortly thereafter, in 1675, Blas Cuculi delivered his testimony to the court in Guatemala in Spanish without the use of a translator, something he stated he was accustomed to do and had done several times before. These two events then mark the transition for the residents of Masca, soon to be Candelaria, from using an indigenous language to using Spanish when interacting with colonial authorities.

But what indigenous language was this? Von Hagen (1943) identified Candelaria as a *reducción* of Tol speakers from Yoro based on his reading of Espino (1977). However, a re-reading of Espino, along with careful

attention to the local history of Candelaria/Masca, clearly documents a different history for the Ulúa valley community. Von Hagen confused two different places with similar names. He misidentified a Candelaria that is in fact still today located northeast of Morazán, Yoro, with Candelaria/Masca. Espino is quite clear that his Candelaria, which was a reducción of Tol speakers, was paired with the nearby town of Guaymas, also a reducción of Tol speakers, both founded in the late seventeenth century. At the point, Blás Cuculí was writing petitions on behalf of a community that had a documented history in place in the San Pedro district beginning in 1536. Guaymas and Candelaria are still towns in Yoro today, located within the region commonly thought to be Tol. So we cannot conclude that the people of Candelaria/Masca spoke Tol.

J. Eric S. Thompson (1938) identified Toquegua as a Maya language, based on the fact that in 1605 they could reply to a priest in an accented Chol, hardly surprising for a polyglot community engaged in commerce with communities throughout the Yucatan peninsula. Feldman (1975) concurred and extended Thompson's argument to say that in Amatitlan, a collection of families gathered from the countryside had surnames that he identified at Chol, Yucatecan, and Nahautl, precisely the same set of languages that modern linguists (Campbell 1979; Costenla Umaña 1981, 1991) say have influenced Lenca.

Many elite community members in this region continued to use indigenous surnames in the colonial period, including many of those listed by Feldman (1975). These surnames were also town names used across a wider region that included both the "Toquegua" area and accepted Lenca areas further south. The same pattern of elites maintaining indigenous surnames that are also town names can be shown for parts of central Honduras known to have spoken Lenca. Toquegua, like Masca, is simply another family surname and town name, perhaps part of a local, community based identity, not a region-wide identity. The people who the Spanish identified as Toquegua in the Ulúa valley most likely spoke a Lenca language as their "lengua materna".

The community of Candelaria used a variety of tactics to persist in the colony. Reducing the scope of agency of Candelaria's residents to acts of domination and resistance places a higher value on some forms of action (violence) than on the repeated actions of everyday life. Candelaria persisted as a historically continuous descendant population that shaped the colonial context into a way of perpetuating their own community through countless small acts. That Candelaria persisted into the nineteenth century demonstrates that these acts were successful.

Beginning in 1675 with the petition of Blas Cuculi on behalf of his town of Masca, we get an image of a community already exploiting the Spanish colonial legal system to attain its own goals. Nor is this the beginning of such tactical action. Cuculi informs us that he had previously been many times before the court on behalf of Masca. The arguments that Blas Cuculi offers for not owing personal labor to the people of San Pedro demonstrate knowledge of Spanish colonial law as it relates to pueblos de indios. He further demonstrates an understanding of the rights and obligations of his town under the encomienda system when he complains his encomendero, Alonso de Osaguera, was not providing the required doctrina to Masca even though they had paid him the owed tribute.

A continued knowledge of Spanish colonial law is evinced in the 1713 statement of Simon Cuculi, who represents the community in a petition for clear title to the land they are living on after their second move. Cuculi cites book, chapter, and paragraph of the 1681 Recopilacion de Leyes to support his argument that the Crown has to give indigenous communities the land they need for their livelihood. He also advanced the legal argument that the actions of his predecessor as Alcalde, Juan Chabacan, who entered into a land contract with Juan de Ferrera, were illegal, since indigenous people could not enter into contracts. This knowledge and exploitation of the colonial legal system was key to helping the community secure and maintain land, and avoid uncompensated labor, helping to solidify the community's place on the landscape and define limits to its role in the labor regime of the colony. These were successful tactics to allow the community to persist.

The continued use of indigenous surnames by some of the elite families in indigenous communities in the Ulúa Valley was another tactic that helped the community persist as a pueblo de indios. Not every elite family adopted the practice, but some in each community in the former provincia del río Ulúa did so. We also saw this in some Lenca communities in central Honduras. Such a practice would remind the community of their origins and history in daily interactions with members of these long-established families.

Candelaria moved twice during the colonial period, both times to avoid the violence of encounters with pirates. Nor was Candelaria unique in doing so. Both the pueblos de indios of Quelequele and Jetegua moved inland for the same reason. The violence of a pirate attack often included the abduction of community members, and raids on the contents of the town church, particularly the saint's images and silver objects. After the first move, while the town was located on the Río Bijao, it was once again sacked by pirates, who landed at Puerto Caballos and came along the road towards

San Pedro Sula. So Candelaria moved a second time, to lands further inland along the road to San Pedro Sula, a location designated by the governor of Honduras. Yet even here Candelaria was still within the range of pirates, who attacked the town in the early eighteenth century while on the way to raid San Pedro Sula. Both Quelequele and Jetegua were more successful in their moves, which put them much further inland than San Pedro Sula and apparently saved them from continued pirate attacks.

The casta system was also a locus of tactics revolving around identity. The residents of small eighteenth-century pueblos de indios like Ticamaya and Candelaria ensured their demographic survival through marriages that incorporated new people, including African descendants, who quite likely brought with them innovative foodways, and whose approaches to producing craft products may have introduced slightly different techniques to the local earthenware tradition.

Marriage across presumed racial or casta boundaries already had a long history in Honduras. This is best viewed as ethnogenesis, a concept that places an emphasis on what emerges from cultural exchanges rather than what precedes them. As Voss (2008) demonstrated in her study of Californio identity shaped at the Spanish Presidio of San Francisco, what emerges cannot be separated into component parts. In Honduras, the emergent identity may best be understood as Honduran, or even (in the area we study) more locally, as *sampedrano* (San Pedran). Attempts to disarticulate new identities into discrete pieces and trace their origins inevitably end up privileging some participants in the project of persistence over others. Thus, whether Eugenia Gertrudis was in fact an india or a mulata is less important than that her casta position was malleable, while her residency and membership in the pueblo de indios continued.

Like Stephan Palmié (2007:71), I see these processes taking place through "novel quotidian practices in the shadow of the Spanish colonial state-- new ways of eating, mating, comporting themselves, and interacting with one another-- that completely evaded the legal categories and ethnic labels". The north coast of Honduras provided "culturally rapidly homogenizing" social situations in which vecinos of Spanish towns, residents of pueblos de indios, and free and enslaved African descendants were often enlisted together in new social formations. My emphasis on the emergence of new forms through tactical engagement in linguistic and material practices aligns this study with the tradition represented by William Hanks (2010:93-94), who sees the attempt "to divide an indigenous inside from a Hispanicized exterior" as "sundering the person into two parts", possible only if each belongs to a distinct social field. In the Honduran



colony, despite the surface appearance of spatial segregation of distinct groups, what we see instead is the taking up of positions in fields that link those different spaces, and gave rise to the historically attested shared project of colonial survival.

The network of pueblos de indios of which Candelaria was a part served to perpetuate indigenous practices, most notably the cultivation, circulation, and use of cacao for ritual purposes. Cacao has a long history of cultivation in this part of Honduras, from at least the earliest settled villages before 1150 B.C. to the present. While Ticamaya was the home in the sixteenth century of "a great merchant in cacao" who specifically engaged in trade with the Maya of Yucatan, it is Jetegua that tells us the significance of the circulation of cacao during the colonial period when it wrote:

Since we are vassals of your Majesty, with the fruits of the cacao that god gave us we give comfort to all the land ...if we are not aided our haciendas of cacao would remain lost and the land would remain lacking in the fruits that god gave us...  
[pues somos vasallos de Su Magestad con los frutos de cacao que dios nos da soccorre toda la tierra.....desamparado nuestras haciendas de cacao que tenemos con que quedara la tierra perdida y careciendo de los frutos que dios nos da..... ]  
(AGCA A1.60 Legajo 5364 Expediente 45339, page 4).

That the "land would remain lacking" hints at both the importance of the circulation of cacao across the territory, and at its use for "the land", in agricultural ritual.

The continued use of chipped stone tools in Ticamaya and Omoa implies the persistence of exchange networks between pueblos de indios throughout the colonial period. Obsidian use at Ticamaya continued long after metal cutting tools became available. Metal was slow to be adopted in the pueblos de indios for which we have archaeological data. In the eighteenth century there was still substantial use of obsidian from both Guatemalan and more local sources at Ticamaya.

People circulated between pueblos de indios as well. Church and civil censuses document in marrying spouses (both male and female) as well as the presence of non-native born indigenous individuals in the communities. People would bring with them their experiences and exposure to other tactics in other communities that might have been suggested as responses to situations in their new

communities. Thus tactical responses to stresses on the pueblos de indios circulated as well.

San Pedro Sula and later Omoa could not have persisted without the pueblos de indios. Without them, the Spanish settlements would have suffered many more surprise attacks, from Dutch, French, English, and even American pirates, and later from the English enemy and their Miskito allies. The Spanish town of San Pedro Sula had to move twice in the sixteenth century after pirate attacks, yet still remained vulnerable in its present location. It was the presence of a coastal watch reporting back to San Pedro Sula that gave it enough advanced warning of attacks that it could minimize the effects of surprise and defend itself. It was indigenous runners from Candelaria and other pueblos de indios who advised San Pedro both when a trading ship had anchored off Puerto Caballos to trade, and when pirate ships had been seen off the coast. This service as both an early warning system and as a front line of defense for San Pedro was repeatedly cited by the residents of Candelaria in their legal claims presented to Spanish authorities.

The fort of Omoa depended on the newly reorganized coastal watch system to inform it when ships were sighted off the coast from Puerto Caballos through to Santo Tomas de Castilla in Guatemala. Also with the founding of the fort, residents of Candelaria re-located to Omoa both to work and as part of the coastal watch.

Yet at the same time, it is amply evident that indigenous communities, in addition to participating in the coastal watch, also were part of and benefitted from the possibilities for commerce resulting from conflict between the European powers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Pueblos de indios such as Tehuma received contraband shipments, which in turn gave them access to a broad range of European goods, especially high value consumables such as sugar, wine, vinegar, and oil. Service in the coastal watch also gave the indigenous people access to European clothing necessary for the transformation from Indian to Ladino. These same contraband goods showed up as the stock in stores owned by Spanish merchants in Omoa.

Beyond contraband, the pueblos de indios were able to participate in the broader Spanish economy after the encomienda system was abolished. By 1690 those Indians not still under encomienda grants were able to use Spanish buyers for cultivated products like cacao, and gathered commodities like sarsaparilla. In order to better obtain these, Spanish merchants began setting up stores in Indian communities such as Tehuma. The people of Candelaria easily had access to such stores, at least some of which were set

up to barter for sarsaparilla, then in great demand in Europe as a treatment for syphilis.

It may be that distance from the colonial capitals created more opportunities for residents of the pueblos de indios on the north coast of Honduras to negotiate their positions in the colony. The historical literature suggests that the province of Honduras was a backwater in the colonial economy, and that the north coast was the backwater of the colony. The lack of a microhistory comparable to that of Candelaria for any other indigenous community in another part of Honduras during this time makes it difficult to know how typical the experiences of this community were.

The illusion of control over colonial life provided by the construction of the fortress at Omoa is misleading. Not only was one of its commanders, Pedro Toll, complicit in contraband activities, others stood accused of allowing French and English traders to tie up at the pier connected to the fort to trade. In 1770 the governor of Honduras investigated one contraband case involving several families at Omoa and Pedro Toll, arresting all and getting ample testimony of the volume of illicit trade that passed through the region. My database of documents lists accounts of over twenty incursions by the English into the valley in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, nearly all of them involving illicit trade. The situation in Omoa got so bad that in 1790 Guatemala appointed a new commander of the fort at Omoa, Manuel Novas, to clean up the region. He immediately moved to restrict the movements of all of the civilian population in the town, including its merchants. For almost six months no one could leave Omoa, until one of the merchants petitioned the government in Guatemala for permission to go on pilgrimage to Esquipulas, breaking Novas's stranglehold on the town.

The effects of such lax control by Spanish authorities over the pueblos de indios provided opportunities for social mobility, for moving from indio to ladino either within the community, or by moving outside of it. In Mejicapa in central Honduras, Juan Vargas and his brothers argued that they were not Indians but rather ladinos because when they worked at Omoa, they were treated as ladinos (1784 AGCA A3.12 Legajo 509 Expediente 5302). By successfully making this argument, they relieved themselves of the need to pay their part of Mejicapa's tribute payment.

While it has been possible to come up with a rich description of many aspects of the colonial history of Candelaria, one element already alluded to above remains elusive; the religious life of the community. The importance of religion was documented in the petition against excommunication in the early eighteenth century, and in the petition for religious instruction in the seventeenth century. It was manifest in the repeated citation of the sacking

of their church and theft of their religious icons as motivation for moving the church and town to a new location. The last population listing from the town in 1809 is from a church document. Any richer perspective on religious experience is impeded by a lack of documentary sources on church life in this community.

From other pueblos de indios in Honduras we have documents suggesting the importance of church buildings to the community, through continued petitions to rebuild churches as bigger and made of less perishable materials. While indigenous people petition for the use of crown funds to rebuild their churches, they are often directed to use their own town and cofradia funds to carry out these improvements. The importance and wealth of cofradias is attested to in the documentary record for many pueblos de indios in central Honduras, but these are lacking for Candelaria.

At the same time, by reading documents from pueblos de indios in the Ulúa valley from the perspective of dialogics, it has been possible to hear an echo of what likely were persistent traditional rituals for the earth. These, combined with the emphasis on church as central to community, and claims for pastoral care, are sufficient grounds to argue that for pueblos de indios in the colonial period, community-level religious practices were probably, like the more visible foodways documented archaeologically, important everyday practices through which people coped with the challenges of the colony, and recreated the colonial world in ways that allowed them to persist as individuals, families, and communities. That it has been possible to reach such a conclusion for a town in the district of San Pedro, long considered to have been the earliest part of Honduras to see indigenous people "disappear", should, I hope, inspire others to pursue the project of placing indigenous actors and communities at the center of colonial history.

## **List of archival documents cited**

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AEC Archivo Eclesiastico de Comayagua, Honduras  
AGCA Archivo General de Centroamerica, Guatemala City,  
Guatemala  
AGI Archivo General de Indias, Sevilla, Spain  
AN Archivo de la Nación, Mexico D.F.  
ANH Archivo Nacional de Honduras, Tegucigalpa  
RAHM Real Academia de la Historia, Madrid

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1534 "Cartas de oficiales reales de Honduras: Diego Garcia de Celis, Puerto de Caballos 6/20/1534" AGI Guatemala 49 N. 9  
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- 1679 "Jetegua saqueado por piratas holandesas" AGCA A1.60 Legajo 5364 Expediente 45339
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- 1703 "Padron de Zelilaca" AGCA A3.16 Legajo 511 Expediente 5328.
- 1710 "Auto en que se mando...mudar el Pueblo de Jetegua" AGCA A1.12 Legajo 50 Expediente 493
- 1714 "Los indios del pueblo de Nuestra Señora de la Candaleria piden ejidos" AGCA A1.45.6 Legajo 368 Expediente 3413
- 1714 "Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria de Masca" AGCA A1.24 Legajo 1581 Expediente 10225
- 1722 "Padron de Jaitique" AGCA A3.16 Legajo 514 Expediente 5398.
- 1722 "Un padronimiento de los tributarios del pueblo de Teconalistagua" AGCA A3.16.3 Legajo 514 Expediente 5402
- 1722 "Diego Gutierrez de Arguelles sobre ingleses en Omoa" AGCA A1.15 Legajo 58 Expediente 716
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