



## **The Emergence of the Regional Cult of El Señor de Esquipulas**

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Prize by

**Jorge Villatoro**

History Department, York University

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**CERLAC**  
8<sup>th</sup> floor, YRT  
4700 Keele Street  
York University Toronto,  
Ontario Canada M3J 1P3

**Phone:** (416) 736-5237  
**Email:** [cerlac@yorku.ca](mailto:cerlac@yorku.ca)

## The Emergence of the Regional Cult of El Señor de Esquipulas

### Introduction

Esquipulas is a municipality within the southeastern district of Chiquimula, Guatemala. Situated on the border with Honduras and El Salvador it is recognized as a major Catholic pilgrimage site that attracted pilgrims from as far away as Mexico and Panama during the colonial period and continues to draw devotees from around the world (Brigham 1965, 203). The image at the centre of worship is a scene from the crucifixion with a black Christ on the cross. The cult of El Señor de Esquipulas has gone through a number of transformations with the most important being its local relevance expanding into a regional phenomenon.

Sallnow claims that a pilgrimage is a mechanism to bridge the institutional gap between a contemplative elite and the localized peasantry (Sallnow 1987, 4). Supra-community festivals do the same as local community

festivals but on a larger scale. They integrate individuals and groups into more extensive congregations and are a means for great and little traditions to keep in touch with each other, thus maintaining the unity of the religious system as a whole (Sallnow 1987, 4). Within Catholicism there is a tension between official and unofficial religions (Sallnow 1987, 6). What is meant by an official religion here is the process of officialization that is driven by, and in turn sustains, a institutional hierarchy, and not necessarily the doctrine or liturgy. The official and unofficial religions often compromise or accommodate each other. (Sallnow 1987, 7). The optional nature of pilgrimage sets it apart from the order of social existence where social status and duty trumps any other obligation (Sallnow 1987, 7). The focal shrines of pilgrimages are themselves peripheral, located apart from administrative and

ecclesiastical centres and sometimes in the wild separated from the regular order of things (Sallnow 1987, 7). Pilgrimages also temporarily divert individuals of the roles they play in everyday life and places them in a state of freedom and unmediated fellowship, what is otherwise known as a state of *communitas* or in other words a model of society that is unstructured or only structured rudimentary by equal individuals who submit together to a general authority (Sallnow 1987, 7). This concept however is normative as pilgrimages are liminoid, meaning that pilgrims are still ultimately bounded by the structure of the religious system within which they generate (Sallnow 1987, 8). Pilgrimage shrines may thus transform into centres of political and economic power, but equally they may recover their *communitas* potential when a new politico-economic centre replaces the old. The new structure enters into a relationship with the old structure, which then becomes sacralized and infused with liminal *communitas*. The former centre has become the periphery, but the

periphery may then become the setting for a new centrality, as more pilgrims make the journey and settle near the peripheral shrines (Sallnow 1987, 8).

These two approaches towards pilgrimage offer a useful contrast. On one hand, pilgrimage is a functional integrative activity, linking together the disparate residential and ethnic groups in a society with the religious elite in successive levels of inclusiveness. On the other hand the inclusiveness of pilgrimage is structurally *disintegrative*, or in other words a temporary abeyance of the hierarchical social order in favour of an egalitarian, role-free mode of association (Sallnow 1987, 8). The second model takes us beyond functionalism, suggesting a dialectic. As an analytical tool it is too inflexible to be of use in a majority of situations. A looser conceptualization giving the full range of variables free play can offer a better means of registering the complexity and contingency of diverse interests (Sallnow 1987, 9).

What is most striking about Esquipulas

is the amount of pilgrims that arrive from all corners. The congregation of a festival is identified by geography while Esquipulas represents a community wide cult that crosses national boundaries. Cults are identified by their social-religious status, as devotees to the shrine in question (Sallnow 1987, 5). El Señor de Esquipulas can be interpreted as a cult as Ladinos, Indians, rural and urban, rich and poor, Honduran, Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Mexican pilgrims all co-participate which means the pilgrims are only connected by common participation in the cult of El Señor de Esquipulas. Kendall finds the majority of pilgrims come from Guatemala at 59.0% and El Salvador at 30.3%. Honduras provides 8.2% of pilgrims while Mexico and the rest of Central America provide 2.0%. The urban and rural distinctions are 32.4% and 67.6% respectively (Kendall 1991, 152). This information while representative of a more recent survey than the period under study still provides some valuable insight into the demographics of the pilgrimage and the popularity of the cult. Borhegyi has

identified fifty-six total towns and villages that worshipped the cult of Esquipulas from Costa Rica up to New Mexico (Borhegyi 1954, 399). This list is incomplete and dated, but it provides a sense of a wider community of pilgrims.

The phenomena under consideration here is El Señor de Esquipulas as a regional cult. Regional cults are middle ranged so they reach further than any parochial cult yet are less inclusive in belief and membership than a world religion in its universal form (Sallnow 1987, 9). Cults have their own central place, and shrines that define their regions and display their own forms of organization. The flow of people, goods, services, and ideas focused upon the central place is part of the internal momentum of the cult itself, cutting across political, economic, and ethnic boundaries. The relation between cult regions and others (political or economic) is therefore not preempted by the model but must be a matter of empirical investigation (Sallnow 1987, 9). The cult of El Señor de Esquipulas has thus undergone transformations from local

dimensions to national scope and beyond, while recently returning to its local dimensions while retaining elements from when it was the focal point of Central America's economic and political development.

### **Chiquimula de la Sierra and the Beginning of the Cult**

Esquipulas is located in the contemporary department of Chiquimula, which was known as Chiquimula de la Sierra during the colonial period. The predominant indigenous group of the area were the Chorti Maya. The first contact between the Chorti Maya and Spaniards occurred in 1524 when Pedro de Alverado sent an expedition of four explorers known as Hernando de Chavez, Juan Duran, Cristobal Salvatierra, and Bartolome Becerra to the province (Brewer 2009, 138). By 1526 the Chorti Maya staged rebellions against the Spanish in several towns likely related to revolts occurring in the highlands to the West (Carmack 1981, 308). In response to these revolts Alverado sent the veteran captain Cristobal Salvatierra and newcomer Jorge

Bocanegra to Chiquimula de la Sierra (Brewer 2009, 138). To establish greater control over the region, Alverado ordered Spanish settlement in eastern Guatemala and began issuing *encomiendas*. However, by the end of 1526 Spanish presence in the province was limited and inconsequential (Brewer 2009, 138).

In 1529 a group of Chorti Maya near the town of *Jalpatagua* killed a Spanish landowner then rebelled against local Spanish settlers (Fuentes y Guzman 1969, 233-235). In early 1530 a Spanish expedition led by Hernando de Chavez and Pedro Amalin with sixty infantrymen, thirty horses, and four-hundred indigenous allies, once again entered Chiquimula de la Sierra to quell the rebellion (Fuentes y Guzman 1969, 119). The Spanish expedition was relatively successful and defeated the Chorti in several towns including Esquipulas (Fuentes y Guzman 1969, 125-130). Esquipulas or *Yzquipulas* as it was known at the time, stands out in this expedition as the only peaceful surrender by the Chorti Indians (Fuentes y Guzman 1969, 129-130). According

to this account written by the Guatemalan chronicler, the *Yzquipulanos* were given three days by the Spaniards to exit their heavily fortified town and surrender. By this time the Spanish expedition found itself weak from broken supply lines, the brutal terrain, and unforgiving indigenous ambushes. The *Yzquipulanos* under siege eventually surrendered after weighing their options. It seems that they could no longer wait for reinforcements so the surrender was most likely due to political or economic reasoning rather than trusting the good hearted Spaniards as Fuentes y Guzman claims (Fuentes y Guzman 1969, 129). The land around Esquipulas was eventually commissioned to Hernandez de Chavez as an *encomienda*. The boiling point of the rebellion in Chiquimula de la Sierra occurred in Copan, Honduras where a Chorti fortification proved difficult to penetrate (Fuentes y Guzman 1969, 150). By the end of 1530 the rebellion was put down in the province and the Chorti began to live with increased Spanish settlement and Spanish

*encomenderos* (Fuentes y Guzman 1969, 137).

Understanding community in Guatemala would not be complete without considering the *encomienda* as an institution that formed key power relationships and consolidated conquest culture (Kramer 2013, 123). It remained throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century as a device for the Spaniards and their descendants to receive tribute in labour, goods, or cash from the indigenous entrusted to their care. The climate and proximity to maritime and land trade routes motivated the election of the province into a colonial administrative zone from the beginning of the conquest (Pompejano 2009, 126). Documents show that Chiquimula de la Sierra was a poor region in terms of resources (Brewer 2009,138) and the eastern region of the country as a whole lacked any substantial resource gain with only a few inhabitants and a long distance from the market of the capital (Pompejano 2009, 133). The number of indigenous tributaries by 1622 did not surpass 1,500 due to a high mortality rate, poverty, and poor conditions of the

soil(Pompejano 2009, 132). The price of land, much more than its agricultural value, was determined by other elements like the presence of work hands, the access to water, and the value of products in relation to its proximity to markets (Pompejano 2009, 134). As such, Chiquimula de la Sierra had its value in its strategic location along the Caribbean coast as a natural border to Spain. However, early on in Spanish colonization this strategic location was inconveniently impeded by preying British and Dutch pirates in the Caribbean that forced the crown to sometimes halt their ships for up to one years time (Gage 1958,310). As such the province did not realize its full potential and Guatemala remained without a port.

Between 1550-1600 there was a dramatic increase in Spanish settlers in the region who went on to enjoy the benefit of living at the crossroads of several trade routes between central Guatemala, western Honduras, northern El Salvador and the Golfo Dulce, which stayed important throughout the colonial period (Brewer 2009, 139). The export

economy attracted the attention of many sixteenth century colonists as unlike other areas of Spanish America, Guatemala had no significant mineral wealth (Van Oss 1986,39). In the time when Fuentes y Guzman was writing his accounts, the province had nineteen towns with about 2,500 indigenous, Spanish and mestizo inhabitants (Pompejano 2009, 126). As stated earlier the region was poor in resources and thus many Spaniards avoided it despite the early grants of *encomiendas* in the province being the most that Alverado granted up until that period (Brewer 2009, 140). However, because of its location on these important trade and communication routes, the province became a vital crossroad for colonial trade in all of Central America. The scene of colonization is then that during the early colonial period Chiquimula de la Sierra produced mainly subsistence agricultural products and cattle from ranching and later in the period it shifted to an export economy based on the production of cash crops. *Encomiendas* were replaced by *latifundios* and large



*haciendas.*

The statue of Christ was sculpted in Guatemala City by the Portuguese sculptor Quirio Catano (Pompejano 2009, 138) The image was sculpted in 1594 at the order of Bishop Cristobal de Morales after being petitioned by the Indians in Esquipulas to commemorate the peaceful conquest of the region. The Indians paid “cien tostones” (one testone being at the value of four reals, or half a dolla) and to meet this expense the Indians planted cotton where the sanctuary now stands (Brigham 1965, 203). The image stood in the village church for over a century in which its fame increased with news of its healing power. The first archbishop of Guatemala, Fray Pardo de Figueroa, began construction on the temple in which the sculpture is now housed but died on February 2, 1751, before he saw it completed (Brigham 1965, 203). In 1759 the President of the Real Audencia of Guatemala, Senor D. Alonso de Arcos y Moreno, completed the basilica at a apparent cost of three million dollars and in January of the same year the

image and remains of the former archbishop were moved to the new basilica in a Roman Catholic ceremony.

There is no definite reason for the dark colour of the image (Pompejano 2009, 137.) Some speculate that the smoke from candles have turned the image an ebony colour; others have made commentary on the black colour representing the sensation of suffering. Others however consider it blasphemous to attribute the colour black to represent God. Some claim the dark skin is due to the blood accumulated in the body after the events of the Passion. While there does not seem to be a definite answer among devotes, Pompejano has found that recent restoration on the image has revealed that it has undergone a process of darkening; it was dark wood to begin, most likely orange-wood, and after years of contact with smoke and devote pilgrims touching the image, it has darkened from its original olive green hue to the ebony colour it is associated with today (Pompejano 2009, 138). Quirio Catano, the sculptor, was of European descent, most likely

Portuguese or otherwise Mediterranean either from Marsella or Genova. In any case Pompejano is of the opinion that he had contact with Africans in commercial ties or through the slave trade and evangelical missions, which could have inspired his choice of wood for the sculpture (Pompejano 2009, 38). He lived in the capital of Guatemala in a neighbourhood of important citizens and has had his existence verified (Pompejano 2009, 138). Questions about the colour of the sculptures skin to be a more recent discussion beginning around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Pompejano 2009, 138).

The basilica was completed in 1758 to house the figure of Christ (Keleman 1967, 129). Raised on a platform and anchored by four towers, the temple is said to dazzle under the subtropical sunlight. The facade is decorated with emphasis on the second story which above it stands a statue of the Virgin Mary (Keleman 1967,129). The walls measure ten to twelve feet thick and the size of the church is apparent once inside. The floor is paved with large red tiles

under silver chandeliers that light the basilica (Brigham 1965, 201.). On the walls hang colonial paintings and *ex votos* in gold, silver, wood, or wax as offerings, although it is unclear whether they are for El Senor de Esquipulas or other saints. Keleman calls the architectural style of this basilica earthquake Baroque, as when compared to architecture in the north or south, it is clear that seismic conditions, regional labour, and local building methods dating to pre-Colombian cultures have all contributed to its special character (Keleman 1967, 136). Earthquakes periodically ravaged Guatemalan villages and destroyed their churches. Years of work and sacrifice could disappear in a instant leaving some rural churches in some kind of constant reconstruction or repair, which proved to be a great burden for the communities for years to come(Van Oss 1986, 118). Van Oss has recorded three earthquakes occurring in Chiquimula between 1733-1765, although it is unclear whether he is talking about the province or the town by the same name (Van Oss 1986,

119).

Writing in the middle of the nineteenth century, Stephens offers a description of the basilica and how it might of stood during colonial times from the road coming from Copan, Honduras.

“and the church, rising in solitary grandeur in a region of wildness and desolation, seemed almost the work of enchantment. The facade was rich with stucco ornaments and figures of saints larger than life; at each angle was a high tower, and over the dome a spire, rearing aloft in the air the crown of that once proud power...” (Stephens 1871, 169).

The basilica was at one point despoiled of its treasure of gold and silver by a troop of Guatemalan Calvary in the wars after independence so we can assume it was highly decorated during the colonial period (Maudslay and Maudslay 1899, 49). The basilica is administered separately than the parish church by the North American Benedictine monks,

although it has only recently fallen under their care (Diener 1978, 96).

By taking note of what rituals Pilgrims perform in more recent years an assumption can be made about their traditional use dating back to the colonial period. Pilgrims make the journey to fulfil a promise made to El Senor de Esquipulas or perform an *accion de gracias* (act of thankfulness) (Kendall 1991, 143). Pilgrims will sometimes form a dense group of worshippers and follow a prayer leader or *reazador* into the church. Family and community images of saints are brought to be recharged in side alters of the basilica (Kendall 1991, 144). Writing from lake Atitlan, in the post-independence period, Maudslay and Maudslay record the morning hymns of pilgrims returning from the shrine at Esquipulas thus exemplifying the popularity of the pilgrimage (Maudslay and Maudslay 1899, 49). Another ritual obligation is purchasing *pan del Senor* (Lords Bread) to bring home to friends and family who could not make the journey

(Kendall 1991, 145). Borhegyi brings to light the manufacturing of these little clay tablets which are also known as *benditos* or *tierra del Santo*. They are made into two inch long and one inch wide and a quarter inch thick tablets from a fine white kaolin obtained in caves close to the sculpture. They are stamped with either an image of the virgin Mary or the crucifix of Esquipulas and blessed by the temples priest. They are eaten or dissolved in water to cure ailments, especially those connected to menstruation or childbirth. These *benditos* are customary to bring back to friends and relatives who were not able to make the pilgrimage (Boregyi 1953, 85). Boregyi finds that the custom of geophagy in connection with pilgrimage to a catholic shrine is found only in the New Mexican town of Chimayo. The village also has a shrine dedicated to Our Lord of Esquipulas (Boregyi 1953, 87). The crucifix itself appears to be a replica. Interesting question arises about how the cult spread nearly 2000 miles along with the process of geophagy.

## **Ecclesiastical Realities**

Van Oss makes the distinction between western Guatemala being predominately indigenous and eastern Guatemala as a preferred destination for Spanish settlers. Eastern Guatemala to Van Oss is present day El Salvador as during the colonial period it was part of the Audencia of Guatemala. For the purpose of this analysis however, we can use his classification as it also includes parts of southeastern Guatemala as areas in which the secular clergy were active (Van Oss 1986, 47). Jurisdictional arguments between regular and secular clergy created tensions which diminished the overall effect of conversion in some instances. Very few secular priests engaged in pastoral activities among the indigenous in the early years of colonialism. By 1555 three regular orders had established around 90 Indigenous congregations, while secular parishes only existed in the eastern city of San Salvador (Van Oss 1986, 37). The secular clergy did not offer their services as

readily did the regular clergy as they were accustomed to better material conditions which were hard to find in East Guatemala (Van Oss 1986, 38). The secular clergy also had complaints about the exemption of indigenous people from paying the tithe (Van Oss 1986, 38). For this reason the secular clergy was more inclined to be drawn to Spanish settlements. The parish around Esquipulas can be described as a lowland, tithing, more Hispanized church led by the bishop and secular clergy (Van Oss 1986, 42). The secular branch thus looked at the volatile but promising export economy as a source of income (Van Oss 1986,42).

The success of the secular clergy in the countryside was conditioned by the attitude of some Spaniard *encomenderos* who were obliged to give religious instruction to their indigenous labourers and who favoured the secular clergy over the regular who constantly denounced *encomenderos* on behalf of the indigenous (Van Oss 1986, 43). Secular priests were more compliant. Some influential Spaniards avoided the regular friars as well as

penalties of the law by persuading the bishop to appoint a candidate of one's liking, maybe even a relative, as priest (Van Oss 1986, 44). In the lowlands clerical power resided more often from family or other ties with wealthy planters and ranchers and personal political influence in the capital. Some prominent families succeeded in obtaining clerical positions for their own members in areas where they had other interests, combining agricultural and commercial activities with the prestige and income generated by parochial benefits. Members of the Paz family served as parish priests and coadjutors in Chiquimula between 1660-1750 (Van Oss 1986, 154). One of whom, Juan Miguel de Paz was the priest of Esquipulas (Van Oss 1986, 218). The establishment of lowland secular parishes reflected a symbiosis between priests, *encomenderos*, and landowners (Van Oss 1986, 44). The *Corregimiento de Chiquimula de la Sierra* was created to allow greater control of Spaniards in the province and to carry on religious indoctrination and social assimilation

(Brewer 2009, 143). Because it was a frontier region many of the government positions were filled by military men and the Catholic Church would play into the politics of Chiquimula de la Sierra.

There was also tension between aspiring clergymen that can be separated into Creole and Spaniard camps (Pompejano 2009, 130). Spanish born friars continued to monopolize higher provincial offices (Van Oss 1986, 159). Creole clergy became predominant after the *Semenario Tridentino* which made it possible for a local creole clergy to form. The creole clergy formed the majority in each order by the end of the eighteenth century (Pompejano 2009, 130).

There were also political power confrontations. The secular clergy had to be selected by the Bishop and by extension the Crown. In a letter sent from the secular clergy in 1728 to the *Audencia y a los Obispos de Guatemala y de Nueva Spain* they denounced the existence of a made up society where judges and their dependents control the assignment of

administrative centres and important business including credit (Pompejano 2009, 130). When secular clergymen failed their duty in their parish they would defend themselves by criticizing the uselessness of integrating the indigenous and then prohibiting them from learning Spanish which “conserves idolatry in ancient rights” (Pompejano 2009, 131). The secular clergy turned into spokesmen denouncing the huge authority deficit, the integration of social, ethnic, and interest based alliances, and for the enquiry of corruption inside the bureaucracy (Pompejano 2009, 131).

Ladino brotherhoods were consistently better funded than the indigenous ones which may indicate that ladinos as a class were more wealthy. While the west had more confraternities, the east saw a substantial amount in money and heads of cattle (Van Oss 1986, 114). The term *ladino* was loosely applied to racial *mestizos* as well as Hispanized Spanish-speaking Indians. The process of cultural 'ladinoization' is typical of the lowlands and is associated with high levels of Spanish

penetration, commercial activity, and plantation monoculture (Van Oss 1986, 200).

Thus, Chiquimula de la Sierra was evangelized under the watch of the secular clergy and their *encomendero* and landholding parishoners. The indigenous were regulated to the margins unless they abandoned their customs and worshipped as Ladinos. Brewer claims that the indigenous language disappeared which is unlikely as language barriers were not static during Spanish colonialism and furthermore this claim undermines indigenous agency which will be discussed in more detail further on (Feldman 2009, 148). Furthermore he identifies the image at Esquipulas as a symbol of cultural, social, and religious assimilation. This idea is most likely correct, but can be developed further.

### **Ritual in Guatemala**

Diener has made a typology to illustrate difficulties in studying and definitively describing Guatemalan religious ceremonies. The study was done in relation to the Guatemal guerilla war in the 1970s, so its relevance is

limited to that context. However, it is useful here to dismiss claims made by early anthropologists studying the cult and to think of alternative explanations.

The development and functional relativist viewpoint are different, but can ultimately be reduced to an idol behind the alter approach. In a developmental paradigm, indigenous communities are gradually being transformed by ideas from a larger society and thus turn into a modern township (Diener 1978, 99). Functional relativists on the other hand argue that indigenous townships have retained historic beliefs in spite of colonialism and have produced various functional forms of social experience (Diener 1978, 101).

For example, Wisdom is of the opinions that the indigenous adapted two religions to each other, producing a third which they consider as native as themselves. In many cases there was complete fusion between native deities and catholic saints (Wisdom 1940, 369-370). He conceptualizes the nature of

Catholicism in eastern Guatemala as a product of synergizing two separate religions. Wisdom as one of the earliest anthropologists of the Chorti Maya region has been a cornerstone in the research done on this indigenous groups and the surrounding area including Esquipulas.

However as some critiques have noted his work is best understood as plain ethnography with no theorizing or interpretive framework (Lincoln Vaughn 2009, 275). A number of authors believe that the cult is the survival of ritual in worshipping Mayan gods, either Ek Ahau, “The Black Lord”, who has control over death or Ek Chuach, the “Tall Black One”, who was the protector of those who travel (Kelsey and Osbourne 1939, 45-50). Another explanation states that pilgrims from distant points were in fact merchants who stopped to pay their respect at a shrine (Thompson 1964, 17). Yucatec merchants that used cacao as their chief currency worshipped Ek Chuah who had a connection with cacao (Thompson 1964 23). The holding of a great market to coincide with a religious festival, or the situation of markets

in important religious shrines like Esquipulas is also believed to reflect pre-Colombian practices as well as European custom (Thompson 1964, 25). Boreghyi also argues that two underlying reasons for the spread of the cult have roots in a pre Colombian past. First is the sacredness of the colour black in middle America and second is the cult of earth-eating as described earlier (Boreghyi 1954, 387) While none of these explanations are necessarily wrong, they ignore larger forces that might of made the cult explode in popularity in Central America.

A critical viewpoint should view Indian townships as part of a regional system of interconnected Indian and Ladino settlements (Diener 1978, 104). The most distinct aspect of Indian ritual in Guatemala serve not to isolate and protect the Indian community but rather function to “suck capital of economic surpluses from Indigenous satellites and channel it to Ladinoized metropolises” (Diener 1978, 93). A major fault of the previous two views is that they assume indigenous communities act within



their own spheres which are either penetrated by outside influence or continue brewing within. As mentioned before the municipality of Esquipulas and the department of Chiquimula have a large population that identify as Ladino, and no explanation has been made to recognize their role in the cult of Esquipulas. Since the indigenous do not operate autonomously, the role of Ladinos as administrators, officials, and landowners undoubtedly has had an effect on the massive pilgrimage surrounding Esquipulas.

Furthering this idea are the cult of the saints which provide avenues to absorb surpluses from the population. There are three types of worship that can fall under the cult of Saints; house saints, church saints and travelling saints. The cults of the saints revolve around the idea that saints own or manage all important natural phenomena. Not the saints as historical personages or spirits but in the actual physical image of the saints (Diener 1978, 95). Church saints have an individual relationship with Indians rather than with the household.

Any personally important event requires gifts to the saints, especially events which involves income. The black Christ of Esquipulas is associated with bees, so a bee keeper is obliged to donate a portion of their income to thank the image. San Antonio owns cattle, La Divina Pastora owns sheep, and so on in this fashion (Diener 1978, 96). Sometimes saints in distant towns are appealed to. They are known to have aided others in the past, are said to have grown tired with regular visitors, or are approached with little prior knowledge (Diener 1978, 96). This individual relationship is a break from former collective ceremonies that the indigenous participated in. Most notably the *cofradías* in the Western highlands allowed for the indigenous to regain some autonomy against Spanish domination. However, in Esquipulas and elsewhere in the eastern lowlands the individual relationship garnered through the church saints point to a liberal economic system in which the extractive agriculture of the lowlands could greatly keep productive. The worshippers of the travelling

saints form the basis of religious brotherhoods or the *cofradia* system. The founder of the basilica in Esquipulas founded a brotherhood for the material support of the edifice. There is evidence as of 1827 that Ladinos of the area abandoned the custom while the indigenous continued following it (Brigham 1965, 203). For example from Totonacapan and Mexico came offerings of wax, and from El Salvador came wax, incense, balsam, oil and brooms (Brigham 1965, 204).

Brigham notes that he felt no wonder or awe that might of developed within the indigenous when he looked at the sculpture of Christ (Brigham 1965, 204). He also finds boxes of gold and silver ex-votos that were apparently for sale by the ounce (Brigham 1965,204). The work of native *platerias* offers an example of a tributary relationship. The lack of medical professionals leads the sick to a silversmith to have a model of the affected part made. This token is carried by the sick person or a friend to an image with a power to heal.

The accumulated offerings of gold and silver body parts are sold to pay for charges of the sanctuary, but according to some reports there's at least one case of the government seizing fifty thousand dollars worth of the treasure (Brigham 1965, 205).

Indian ritual serves as and appropriation process funnelling surpluses from Indian peasants to Ladino elites (Diener, 1979, 105). The rent function does not derive from pre colombian or feudal traditions but from the origins of the modern commercial pattern in Europe (Diener 1978, 105). Mechanisms of ritual appropriation were then introduced into the new world to support the clerical establishment and later to support Ladinos (Diener 1978, 106). One observation is that Indians know how to produce the candles for use inside the basilica, but choose to purchase them instead. Gage also records rituals in the seventeenth century where Indians had to pay to partake and purchase candles for the ceremony (Gage 1958, 238).

The metropolis-satellite structures of world capitalism have not remained historically stable, nor have they undergone uninterrupted development (Diener 1978, 105). English merchants from Belize brought wares to Esquipulas and carried practically all of the foreign business of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador in exchange for native grown indigo. Steamships and railways changed the course of trade so much that the fair might of lost some importance (Maudslay and Maudslay 1889, 49). This period can be identified as Esquipulas at the apex of regional importance which aspects of the pilgrimage today still retains.

However this argument by Diener is unsatisfying in a number of ways. First, it undermines indigenous agency and places them in the same position as the other paradigms do. Instead of being at the mercy of social constructs between the indigenous and their catholic colonists, this paradigm limits the experience of indigenous people to the economic sphere. Furthermore it homogenizes

the experience of all the indigenous of Guatemala into a Marxist interpretation of a global division of labour. As will be discussed further on, Guatemalan colonialism was not static in all parts of the country. Lastly, this explanation overlooks the colonial period completely and does not offer explanations for ritual that are most likely linked to this time period.

### **Interpretations**

A miraculous shrine has two aspects. First it is the centre of a supralocal cult, the focus of a extensive pilgrimage that cuts across distance, departmental and international boundaries (Sallnow 1987, 243). The second is that it must be inserted into the ritual space and politico-ecclesiastical organizations of a specific locality. The configuration of a cult can be seen in part as the outcome of a process where the extralocal shrine is institutionalized, ritually and organizationally in its local settings (Sallnow 1987, 243).

The cult of El Senor de Esquipulas has

undergone transformations from local dimensions to national scope and beyond, and has recently returned to its local dimensions while retaining elements from when it was central to Central America's economic and political development. The cult represents a symbolic inversion in coincidence with the Bourbons' political desire to secularize the parishes and reduce the power and autonomy of the religious orders. What is interesting is that the cult is not referenced in any contemporary reference besides in *Los Marginales* de Fuentes y Guzman (Pompejano 2009,136). This might mean that the cult went through a process of accelerated propaganda to increase its popularity.

Miracles or the excitement and cultic momentum that they generate could be seen as a response to a crisis (Sallnow 1987,88). This view can however never stand alone. Shrines emerge onto a historically configured ritual topography, a preexisting pattern of sacred sites from which they draw their significance.

Important regional shrines tend to emerge and develop distinct and apart from the patron saints of villages and towns in a sanctuary separate from the village church (Sallnow 1987,89). It has its own iconological identity and its titular fiesta and pilgrimage will be staged at a different time from the local patronal festival. In the histories of certain shrines there is evidence of a struggle between custodians of the shrine and parish clergy as the latter try to suppress or control the popular miracle site (Sallnow 1987, 89).

Solorzano is the chief source of local narratives about Esquipulas. From him is gathered the original document that reports the contract signed in 1594 between ecclesiastical authority and Quiro Catano, the Portuguese sculptor (Richardson 1995, 112). He also reports the first documented miracle occurring in 1603 (Richardson 1995,112). Solorzano's account was written around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and he adds his own opinions throughout. For one, he is adamant about

highlighting the fact that the image was made for the Chorti indians after only one hundred and three years following the discovery of the Americas and only sixty-eight years after establishing the first city in Guatemala (Richardson 1987, 112). As related in the history of the image, the indigenous of Esquipulas petitioned to have it sculpted to commemorate the peaceful conquest of the region. From the mythohistory of the beginning of the cult, we can gather that the indigenous of Esquipulas not only surrendered peacefully to the Conquistadors, but they also requested an image of the Spaniards most venerated being. This story is not to incredible to believe, but it projects an image of the indigenous readily accepting the Catholic religion as their own almost immediatley following the conquest.

The reality however is that the indigenous population of Chiquimula dropped 50% between 1549-1589 and in Esquipulas dropped even more drastically by 65% (Brewer 2009,145). At the same time the township of

Jilotepeque saw an increase of 23%, reflective of the indigenous fleeing Spanish control (Brewer 2009,145). By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century there were still problems between Spaniards and the Indigenous such as small uprisings despite nearly two hundred years of living together (Brewer 2009, 145). Many indigenous chose flight and abandonment as a better alternative than paying tribute to the Spaniards. As a result the towns *Jocotan* and *Comotan* became pockets where some Chorti escaped the overseeing Spaniards (Brewer 2009,141). This may be due to some *enconmienda* tributes being to high, like the grant in Esquipulas that required the indigenous to pay tributes in silver until the end of the colonial period (Brewer 2009,141). At the same time heavy ladinoization was occurring as indigenous people abandoned the Chorti language for Spanish. At the time of the emergence of the cult, only the most Hispanized Ladinos escaped economic, racial, and ethnic prejudices in Spanish society while some indigenous lived in their own enclaves

and “walked about naked” (Brewer 2009,146).

Solorzano has his own accounts about the color of the image and he states in capital letters “LA IMAGEN NO ES DE COLOR NEGRO”(Richardson 1995, 113). Here again his opinion bleeds through as he is deeply troubled by pilgrims or devotees taking the image at face value and calling it a 'Black Christ' which connotes racial status. He rejects the explanations revolving around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as smoke and incense has turned the image black, or that Catano carved the image from dark wood purposely to match the skin tone of the indigenous (Richardson 1995, 113). He claims that Catano imitated *la sangre muerta* or the dead blood that covered the body of Christ as a result of the beating given to him and the ordeal of the crucifixion (Richardson 1995,113). Again, here we see Solorzano speculating about the mythohistory of the sculpture. There is no reasonable way that Solorzano could know the intentions of the sculptor. Furthermore, by

attributing the colour to *la sangre muerta*

Solorzano takes away from discourses on race and attributes it to faith which solidifies Roman Catholic liturgy and belief to his audience.

During the first twenty years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in relation to the explosion of the cult at half century, the clergy and civil authorities had a dispute over scarce resources in a poor province (Pompejano 2009, 132). The number of indigenous tributaries didn't surpass 1,500 persons and it was rare for land to be sold for more than “6 tostones por caballeria”.

Furthermore the land was mainly used to raise livestock and rarely were they producing more profitable crops like sugarcane, cacao or indigo (Pompejano 2009, 132). By the second half of the dispute which as its principle objective was to possess land, the ethnic actor receded and nothing impeded liberal access to gaining land titles. This seems like an indication of economic and social modernization, but also cultural ladinization, especially in in the districts that constitute the focal point of the

emergence of the cult (Pompejano 2009, 134).

In the east economic pressures and clerical attitudes as well as a loose social fabric accelerated 'ladinoization' with all the consequences for Parish finance and religious life (Van Oss 1986, 77). Since the east was predominately Ladino, the secular clergy benefited from tithe payments. In this sense the secular clergy had more reason to advance ladinoization in the eastern lowlands as it would mean more contributions. Pilgrimages also provided some parishes with another supplemental resource (Van Oss 1986, 103). Van Oss finds some struggles in towns and parishes claiming the image for themselves. He also mentions Esquipulas as being the greatest pilgrimage of them all attracting 10,000 to 20,000 pilgrims (Van Oss 1986, 104). The fair generated so many sales that in a bad year such as in 1818 the loss significantly depressed the provinces sales tax receipts (Van Oss 1986, 104).

The Cult took on political usefulness

during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It converted from local dimension into national and Mesoamerican myth. Pompejano identifies this process as occurring in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The adoption of the sculpture by civil and ecclesiastical authorities centralized its devotion, initiating a cultural and ethnic homogenization with large political reach to govern the different ethnic segments (Pompejano 2009, 129). Fray Pedro Pardo de Figueroa moved the image of el Cristo Negro to the sanctuary it stands in now after being miraculously cured by visiting it. Dying before the sanctuary was built, his remains were moved into the sanctuary in 1759 a week after it was completed under the eye of all the archbishops in Mesoamerica from Chiapas to Honduras and other colonial authorities, including the president of the Audencia, Alonso Arcos y Moreno (Pompejano 2009, 144). The story of where to place the temple is reminiscent of the Virgin of Guadalupe as an Indigenous man was given a vision of the Black Christ where the temple now stands.

Furthermore the sanctuary occupies the space in which an older temple to the god Icelaca once stood, reminiscent of other cathedrals being built on pre-colombian sites throughout Latin America (Pompejano 2009, 144). Secular priests after secularization were basically powerless to suppress hybrid elements of Indian Catholic observance thus some rituals retain elements of older forms of worship with or without the realization of devotees (Van Oss 1986, 140).

Secularization took place at the same time as the French Enlightenment which stimulated reform policies and new concepts of social and economic progress reflected in programs of agrarian reform, the building of infrastructure, and stimulation of educational and technological development as well as church reforms (Van Oss 1986, 142). The Bourbon reforms were designed to reinvigorate imperial as well as Iberian institutions. The secular clergy thus had a role in carrying these ideas in the Americas (Van Oss 1986, 142). The

clergy followed royal administrators in deploring the western parishes. Indian clothing habits came under criticism and Hispanization of the Indians became a prerequisite for economic and social progress (Van Oss 1986, 143). Furthermore, the population had a minor capacity for resistance than other zones in the country. In the central-western highlands, the size of ejidos permitted a reproduction of collective identity and could thus defend against Spanish advances while maintaining economic order (Pompejano 2009, 133).

The Black Christ is a divine that supports suffering and the pain of death like the indigenous bearing the weight of the conquest. The explicit message is that everyone is given salvation if they live a generous life in suffering that is presented by death (Pompejano 2009, 138). It permits a consolidation of the hierarchical order that justifies historical suffering. From this emerges a double hierarchy, one holy and the other political, which organizes the races and legitimizes the



original division of power (Pompejano 2009, 139). This is an ethnic and religious compromise destined to consolidate the conquest. A compromise that not only allows the colour black of the image, which is a distinctive trait of the historical and religious pantheon of the Mayas, but also other elements like limiting discourse, determining the calendar of the fiestas, and the relationship with commercial centres and pilgrimage (Pompejano 2009, 139). Esquipulas since precolonial times constitutes a commercial space where east and west meet, but this ceased with the interruption of the conquest and pirate activities in the Caribbean (Pompejano 2009, 142). It reemerged during the eighteenth century as a regional cult promoted by civil and religious authorities. During this period it was at its height of political and economic importance, as it at once consolidated the racial hierarchy of the conquest and of the catholic church in Guatemala while also attracting pilgrims who came to worship and trade. Here is where Diener's argument becomes relevant again. The

pilgrims came to Esquipulas with cash crops which the secular clergy promoted to grow. The large amount of trade done with British merchants exemplifies a satellite-metropole relationship which the pilgrimage encouraged and sustained. After the arrival of cheaper commerce, the cult lost some importance but still retained its status as a national image in Guatemala and continues to appeal to the Ladino and Indigenous residents of Central America.

### **Comparative Study**

In this brief comparative study the cult of El Señor de Wanka, or "Lord of the Crag" will be examined to determine shared properties and differences with El Señor de Esquipulas. It hopes to find patterns that confirm that the origins of regional cults are established through formal and informal institutional practices within the colonial Latin American context. First, however, Mills provides an overview of Andean Christianity that can be helpful in contrasting experience between the Andes and

Central America. For one, similar to Solorzano, A variety of commentators assured their readers that Indigenous devotion to holy images had been won at the expense of loyalties to the devil (Mills 2008, 518). Solorzano relates this to us by emphasizing the speed in which the indigenous in Esquipulas converted to Catholicism. Also like the first recorded miracles and visions of El Señor de Esquipulas, visions in the Andes usually looked for especially native devotees (Mills 2008, 519). The resettlement of native Andeans brought destructive changes which is when sacred images began to be a part of indigenous self understanding, similar to the intense process of ladinoization done in Guatemala (Mills 2008, 521) Finally, the cult in Esquipulas and others in the Andes have relied on non-Indian sparks and promoters to lift the image to its current status (Mills 2008, 523).

El Señor de Wanka was chosen for this study for a number of similarities it shares with El Señor de Esquipulas. They are both

portrayals of Christ. While it is a mural and not a sculpture, El Señor de Wanka still shows a suffering Christ tied to a column and being whipped by his torturers, in relation to the crucified Christ in Esquipulas (Sallnow 1987, 243). Like the process of geophagy, El Señor de Wanka is associated with geographical features that have healing properties. In this case there are three rivers that run behind the shrine named of Christ, of the Virgin, and of the devil (Sallnow 1987, 245).

The first apparition of the image occurred to an indigenous man and the beginning of the cult only attracted local pilgrims to a thatched church (Sallnow 1987, 247). It became prominent only after a rich mine owner, Pedro Valero, was healed by the water behind the sanctuary (Sallnow 1987, 247). Almost parallel to events in Esquipulas, it took the discovery of the image by a wealthy Spaniard to cement the cult as one of regional importance. The transformation of social status in the myths correlates with parallel transformations in other

domains, both religious and cult organization (Sallnow 1987, 248). The tortured divinity delivered a general promise of salvation and love to the indigenous man. By contrast Valeros vision was of Christ as a divine healer, in which votive offerings are given in return for a cure. The transformation of the seer is correlated with the change in the ecclesiastical standing of the cult (Sallnow 1987, 249). The Indian had to be changed to be accepted as a full ecclesiastical recognition of devotion.

Pilgrimage is a potential instrument for denying, claiming, reaffirming, or temporarily recovering ethnic status (Sallnow 1987, 204). Pilgrimage is found on local attachments, which are carried outward into the extralocal arena. In the Andes, participating in a *nacion* groups is to declare oneself an *indio*. Mestizo status may be claimed or asserted through the cults as well, but less unambiguously, for it is more of a matter of distancing oneself from things Indian. In Guatemala, the elaborate system of *cofradias* are geared toward a village

saint but the pilgrimage to the shrine of El Senor de Esquipulas is convened spontaneously. A renown individual announces he is making a visit to the shrine, and his friends and kin enrol voluntarily in this group (Sallnow 1987, 203). Besides the *cofradias*, much honor is paid to the saints on a more private and voluntary basis. Sometimes this is done within the household but much is also done through participating in pilgrimages, or how they are sometimes refereed to as *romerias*(Reina 1969,176). The nature of healing miracles says that the worshippers are not concerned with agricultural cycles, but with the body and physical aspects. The miracles are related to an individual destiny and not a collective domain (Pompejano 2009, 148). Following its rediscovery by Valdero the shrine is said to have attracted more attention. Sallnow thinks its fame was assisted by a giant epidemic afflicting Cusco and other parts of highland Peru (Sallnow 1987, 249).

Miracles or the excitement and cultic

momentum they generate could be seen as a response to crisis (Sallnow 1987, 88). This view can however never stand alone. Shrines emerge onto a historically configured ritual topography, a preexisting pattern of sacred sites from which they draw their significance.

Important regional shrines tend to emerge and develop distinct and apart from the patron saints of villages and towns in a sanctuary separate from village church (Sallnow 1987, 89). It has its own iconological identity and titular fiesta and pilgrimage will be staged at a different time from the local patronal festival.

In the histories of certain shrines there is evidence of a struggle between custodians of the shrine and parish clergy as the latter try to suppress or control the popular miracle site (Sallnow 1987, 89). From this brief comparison, social forces that shape pilgrimages and the cults at their centre are readily identifiable. The formal and informal institutions of the Catholic Church and Spanish colonialism has shaped the ways in which Christianity has developed in Central America.

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