

COLONIZATION AND CULTURAL INTERACTION: EXPLORING THE EXPRESSION AND CONTINUATION OF ETHNIC IDENTITY IN SPANISH COLONIAL FEMALE RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

Evelyn R. Nimmo¹

Resumo

Na discussão sobre a colonização espanhola da América Latina, é fundamental levar em consideração o impacto da Igreja Católica sobre as colônias espanholas. Instituições religiosas influenciaram vários aspectos da sociedade colonial, incluindo a economia, o sistema político e a ideologia. Conventos são espaços interessantes para explorar os mecanismos de colonização, pois não só mantiveram as ideologias raciais e de classe trazidos da Espanha, mas também forneceram uma base moral e religiosa para a presença colonial. As freiras participavam ativamente no desenvolvimento e manutenção da sociedade de elite espanhola. No entanto, um número significativo de mulheres indígenas também fez parte das comunidades conventuais e formas de vida delas foram modificadas tanto como resultado da colonização, assim como da sua participação nas instituições religiosas. Nesse artigo discute-se a cultural material dos conventos nas colônias espanholas a buscando de explorar como as mulheres espanholas e indígenas expressavam suas identidades étnicas e religiosas dentro da comunidade religiosa por meio da cultura material e do variados modos de vida. Assim, pesquisas arqueológicas realizadas em 2005 no convento *La Limpia Concepción*, em Riobamba (Equador) foram utilizadas para examinar os vestígios arqueológicos no contexto da história social, econômica e cultural.

Palavras-chave: arqueologia histórica, etnicidade, identidade, gênero, transculturação, colonização.

Abstract

In exploring the colonization of Spanish Latin America, it is important to consider the impact of the Catholic Church on the colonial endeavor. Religious institutions influenced various aspects of colonial life, including the economic, political and ideological. Convents are interesting institutions through which to explore the mechanisms of colonization as they not only maintained racial and class ideologies brought over from Spain, but they also provided the moral and religious justification for the colonial presence. The nuns living within the convent actively participated in the support and maintenance of the colonial elite. However, a large number of indigenous and lower-class women were also part of the convent community and their lived experiences were influenced not only by colonization, but also by their participation in the religious community. This paper will examine the material culture from a Spanish colonial convent in order to understand how the Spanish and indigenous women within expressed their ethnic and religious identities to the community. The paper uses as a

¹ Doutora pela University of Reading, UK. Pesquisadora Associada do Museu Paranaense. E-mail: ernimmo@gmail.com.

case study archaeological research conducted at *La Limpia Concepción* convent in Riobamba, Ecuador, in 2005, examining the excavated material culture in its unique historic, social and economic context.

Keywords: historical archaeology, gender, ethnicity, identity, transculturation, colonization.

INTRODUCTION

Religious institutions in colonial Latin American towns were essential to the creation of colonial identities and the maintenance of the ruling Spanish elite. Despite the importance of such institutions in the colonial endeavor, few archaeological studies seek to examine the daily workings of these communities and their relationship with the towns in which they were situated. Female religious communities, such as convents, were a necessary part of the development of colonial towns because of their social, political, and economic role within the community. They not only provided spiritual support to the local population, support which was integral to Spanish identity, but they were also inextricably linked economically and politically with local wealthy Spanish families. Elite society supported convents through donations and daughters, while simultaneously relying on such institutions for their economic and social maintenance. Furthermore, convents were heavily entrenched in the promotion of the perception of colonial success as they helped to legitimate and uphold the Spanish elite as the rightful rulers of the colonial world. One of the most prevalent misconceptions of convents in colonial society, and in early modern Europe, was that life inside the convent walls was austere, solitary, poor and strictly communal (such as shared living spaces and activities). The reality, however, was much different. Nuns within wealthy religious institutions lived relatively comfortable lives and were able to assert their individuality, which stemmed from their economic and ethnic background as members of the ruling elite.

This paper examines a community of religious women in a small town called Riobamba in the Ecuadorian Andes. The archaeological research undertaken at La Limpia Concepción convent in Riobamba represents one of the first archaeological examinations of colonial religious women in South America. Archaeological perspectives, such as the case study explored here, can add much to discussions of

female religious communities and their role in Spanish colonial society. The material remains of convents provide us with the unique opportunity to explore the material world which was constructed and experienced by the women within. Through close readings of archival resources and the analysis of excavated material culture, archaeology can study the materiality of everyday existence within the convent and the relationship women had with their environment and the objects they used. From this, archaeological research can examine the detailed workings of the interior community, the daily lived experience of both upper and lower classes, and the roles such communities played in the spiritual and ethnic identities of wider colonial society. The goal of this paper is to examine how women within the convent were expressing their ethnic identities within the religious community through material culture excavated from the convent.

CONTEXT

Historical research on convents in both Europe (Spain and Italy) and Latin America have explored many aspects of life within the cloisters and the relationship of the religious community with the lay population (CHOWNING, 2006; BURNS, 1999; EVANGELISTI, 2006, 2007; HILLS, 2004a, b; LAVRIN, 1976, 1986; THOMAS, 2003). Researchers have discovered strong links between the nuns living within the convent and their families and business associates outside the walls. Nuns of the black veil (or choir nuns – the highest order of nun) came from elite Spanish families, they paid a significant dowry to profess as a nun of the black veil, and they were involved in the administration and politics of the community (LAVRIN, 1966). The convent community was made up of a small population of these upper-class choir nuns along with a large population of lower-class and ethnically non-Spanish women: lower-class nuns, *donadas*, servants, or slaves (STOLCKE, 1994; BURNS, 1999). Convents were not marginal institutions in the landscape; they were urban institutions which were integral to the economic, social, and political world in which they thrived (BURNS, 1999; 2001; HOLLER, 1998; LAVRIN, 1966, 1976, 1986).

While some researchers have argued that convents were institutions which housed the superfluous daughters of the nobility, the strength of religious identity and

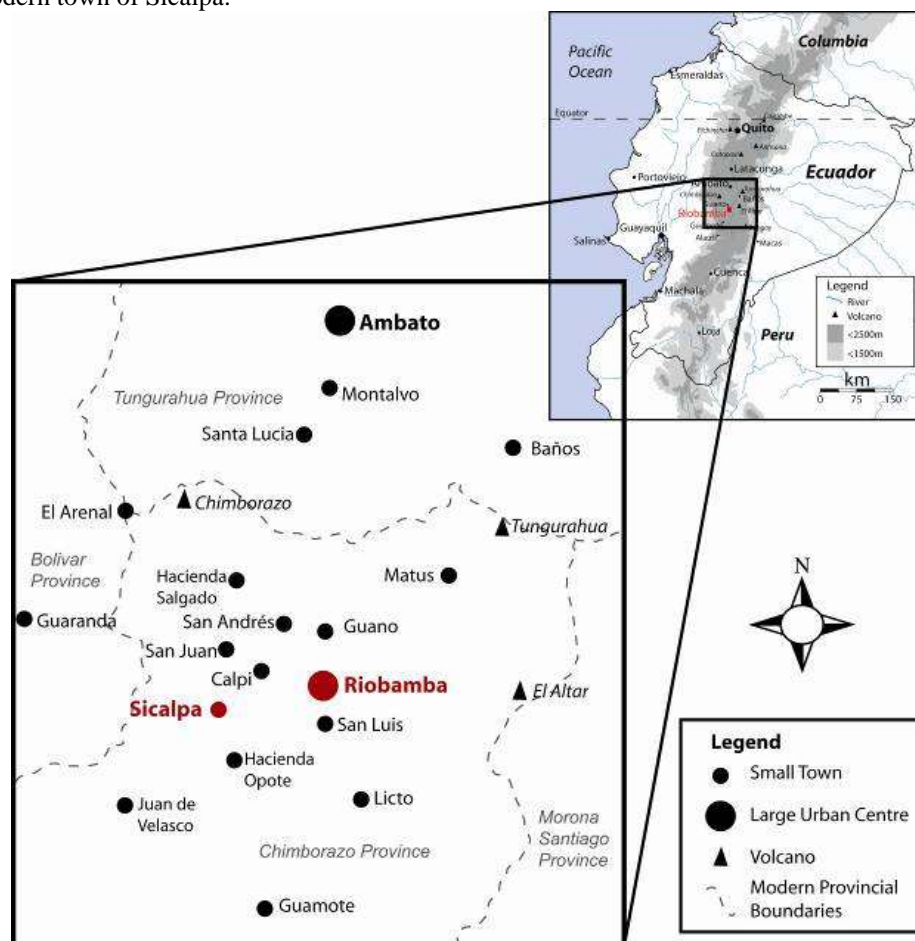
faith during this period cannot be discounted. Women chose to enter convents for various reasons, based on their own personal and familial circumstances, and most did so because of a very real devotion to the Catholic Church. The spiritual role of convents was integral to the colonizing mission in Spanish America as it represented the purpose and success of the colonial endeavor to bring Catholicism to the indigenous peoples of South America and claim new territory for the Church and the Spanish Crown. Many convents were also deeply involved in the economic success of the colonial ruling class. Convents provided the economic support necessary through loans (*censos*); they also provided a legitimate place for unmarried daughters thus allowing elite families to reduce the number of expensive marriage dowries paid (BURNS, 1999; CHOWNING, 2006). By supporting Spanish society both spiritually, economically, and reinforcing ethnic divisions, convents were heavily involved in colonization and the creation of colonial hierarchies and institutions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

La Limpia Concepción convent, Riobamba, Ecuador

The archaeological research undertaken in this project was conducted in the Andean town of Sicalpa, Ecuador, which was the site of the colonial town called Riobamba (Figure 1). The colonial town of Riobamba was abandoned by the Spanish *cabildo* (town council) after a devastating earthquake in 1797 that destroyed most of the colonial buildings, caused a massive landslide which buried a portion of the city, and killed a large proportion of the population (TERÁN NAJAS, 2000).

Figure 1: Map of modern Riobamba region in Ecuador. The colonial town site of Riobamba was located at the modern town of Sicalpa.

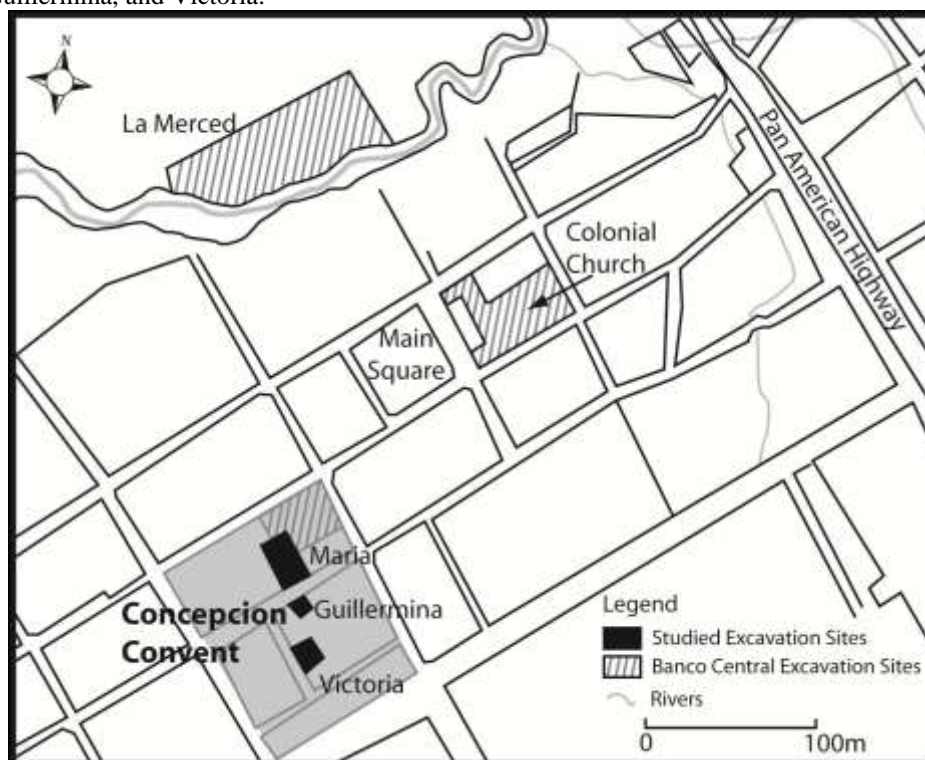


La Limpia Concepción convent was founded in 1605 and continued to be an important spiritual center until it was destroyed during the 1797 earthquake (TERÁN NAJAS, 2000). The destruction of the town and later abandonment of the site by colonial officials provides a unique opportunity for archaeologists to explore urban architecture and material culture. Intact colonial contexts are rare to encounter in urban archaeology in Andean communities due to the amount of disturbance and development many cities have undergone over the past 500 years. Because of the earthquake episode in Riobamba and the abandonment of the town, colonial contexts underneath the destruction have experienced minimal disruption from later building episodes. Therefore, historical archaeology in colonial Riobamba provides a context through which to explore urban institutions such as convents and monasteries from the Audiencia of Quito (modern day Ecuador including parts of Peru and Brazil).

Excavation and material culture

The archaeological research undertaken at La Limpia Concepción convent in Riobamba represents one of the first archaeological examinations of colonial religious women in South America. In 2005, field excavation was undertaken by the author and her team in three areas of the former convent, including: the main cloister garden (Maria site), a private living space (Victoria site), and an administrative space within the main cloister (Guillermina site) (Figure 2). The spatial distribution of artefacts excavated from three areas of the convent reveal slight differences in the types and frequencies of artefacts used in these different spaces (NIMMO, 2008). The differences between the excavated interior contexts (Victoria and Guillermina) suggest that the two spaces were used for different purposes and these were interpreted as one being a more public, administrative space, while the other was likely a nun's private cell. Excavations in the garden contexts in Maria and Victoria sites also show differences in frequencies and types of artefacts suggesting different uses of the gardens. The documentary research suggests that the Maria site was very likely within the main cloister of the convent and as such a very different artefact assemblage is expected from the actual living spaces of the convent, as seen in the Victoria site.

Figure 2: Plan of modern town of Sicalpa with location of excavation sites Maria, Guillermina, and Victoria.



A total of eight test pits (1x2m) were excavated during the field season in 2005. The most numerous type of artefact excavated from all three sites was coarse earthenware which represents 94% of the assemblage. The high frequency of this artefact type is common at Spanish colonial sites (DEAGAN, 1987; JAMIESON; SAYRE, 2010) and is indicative of a strong earthenware producing tradition in both the Andean regions and in Spain. The majority of the earthenware excavated from all three sites were unglazed utilitarian vessels which make up 81% of the assemblage and most of these are plain or slipped body sherds of unidentifiable vessel forms. These locally produced wares were probably used as storage and cooking vessels in all homes and institutions. The remaining coarse earthenware assemblage includes imported earthenware from Panama and Spain, and local glazed majolica. Refined earthenware was also found in colonial contexts (1% of assemblage), including Chinese export porcelain (NIMMO, 2008).

While ceramic vessels make up the majority of the assemblage excavated from La Limpia Concepción convent, a small amount of both ceramic and non-ceramic objects were also collected that cannot be classified as cooking or tableware (i.e. spindle whorls, gaming pieces, sewing implements, currency pieces and other personal items). Although these objects are only a small portion of the entire assemblage, they provide a glimpse of the objects used by women living in the convent outside of the activities of food preparation and consumption. These items offer information on the dating of certain contexts and they also reflect choices being made by women living inside the convent regarding the objects they chose to wear, use and create. While the ceramic assemblage provides information on the community of women as a whole, the small finds provide insight into lives of individuals within that community.

Archival research

In order to gain a full understanding of La Limpia Concepción convent, it was important to explore the available primary historical documents which in their interpretation can provide vast amounts of information on daily activities, economic dealings, social relationships, and perceptions of both the women living inside the convent and those dealing with them on the outside. The main source of primary

historical data comes from the *Archivo Historico “Juan Felix Proano” de la Casa de la Cultura de Chimborazo, Riobamba* (AHCC/R) which houses notary documents from colonial Riobamba ranging from the sixteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century. The notary documents include contracts of sale and purchase, legal agreements, court cases and law suits, and financial dealings, as well as wills and testaments. Over 200 years of documents were surveyed for information related to the convent and its activities. The *Archivo de la Curia de Riobamba* (ACR) in Riobamba was also surveyed, as well as the *Archivo General de Indias* (AGI) in Seville, Spain.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Spinning as an expression of ethnic identity

Spindle whorls and the act of spinning with a distaff in the colonial convent is an activity which represents a continuity of both European and indigenous traditions within the colonial context. Women of colonial Spanish families would have grown up participating in the spinning of wool as a pastime in a family setting (TILLEY; SCOTT, 1978). Similarly women of indigenous communities would have been embroiled in the production of textiles both in the home, through spinning and small scale production, and in the wider context of *mita* labor in the local *obrajes* (GRAUBART, 2000). Although differences in material culture can be seen as a continuity of different traditions, it is important to explore the choice of material culture as an expression of personal and shared identity within the community. The spindle whorls found archaeologically in colonial convents show that most spindle whorls were being produced through a reuse of local undecorated coarse earthenware. The majority of the spindle whorls found in La Limpia Concepción were fashioned out of plain or slipped utilitarian vessels with only one example showing any form of decoration (Figure 3). This example seems to be made of coarse earthenware as well, but it is highly polished, has incised decorations, is well shaped into a circle and has a distinct and polished hole in the center for the distaff. This spindle whorl was found in a context that is believed to be an enclosed garden associated with a nun’s private cell. Archival documents suggest the convent had various cells which were privately owned and occupied by individual nuns. These cells often had gardens of their own, kitchens, and rooms for entertaining,

and have been noted in many colonial convents, such as Santa Catalina in Cuzco, Peru (BURNS, 1999).

The undecorated examples found archaeologically are much less refined in their creation. The majority of these spindle whorls were found in the Maria site, which is associated with a communal garden space. The difference in the attention to detail between the two different types is significant. While the coarse earthenware spindle whorls were likely fashioned quickly and for a functional purpose, perhaps from pieces discarded in the midden heap within the convent, the decorated spindle whorls used in private spaces show a deliberate choice of decoration and shape. Spindle whorls from the Concepción convent in Cuenca further demonstrate this choice; the Cuenca spindle whorls feature a choice of not only material, such as the reuse of imported Sevilla blue on blue majolica, but they are also a choice of form and decoration (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Partial coarse earthenware spindle whorl excavated from Maria site (left) and incised earthenware spindle whorl excavated from the colonial phase of Victoria site (right).



Fonte: Evelyn Nimmo.

Figure 4: Sevilla blue on blue majolica spindle whorls from the Concepción Convent, Cuenca, Ecuador.



Fonte: Evelyn Nimmo.

Gosden (2004) notes that elite material culture is dependent on the accumulation of 'wealth' within a certain context allowing a group to distinguish themselves from others. But this form of consumption relies on 'control over standardized items of wealth' (GOSDEN 2004, p. 61). Within the context of the convent, 'wealth' was prohibited from being overtly displayed; nuns all wore the same habit, and they participated in the same activities. While there were hierarchical distinctions based on class and ethnicity, overt displays of wealth and status through material culture would have been severely limited outside of the nuns' private living areas. The construction of an elite material culture would, therefore, require the subtlety necessary for a devout religious community while simultaneously distinguishing women in a supposed homogenous community. The differences in spindle whorls from colonial convents suggest that women inside the convent were creating their own elite material culture in unique ways. The presence of the decorated spindle whorl in the private garden of a nun's cell suggests its use and ownership by the nun residing in the space. By choosing, purchasing, and using spindle whorls that were distinct from the common coarse earthenware spindle whorls most frequently found in the convent, elite women were making a conscious choice to distinguish themselves from the rest of the community. Because only the nuns of the black veil or the elite secular women living inside the convent would have had access to capital necessary to commission or purchase items, it is likely that the highly decorated objects belonged to them. The lower class nuns and servants would have been much poorer and unable to make the same kinds of consumer choices as the upper class Spanish women. If we assume that many of these lower class women inside the convent were likely of indigenous or *mestizo* descent, the distinction of material culture takes on even greater significance as it implies an ethnic difference as well as a class distinction.

Food, food preparation, and tableware

Archaeologists of colonial Latin America have widely discussed the continued use of Spanish style majolicas in the colonial setting as a means of maintaining and expressing Spanish ethnic and class identities (DEAGAN, 1983, 1987, 1996; JAMIESON, 2000a, 2001, 2004a, b). The majolica industry within the colonies, such as those in Panama and Mexico, demonstrates an adherence to the popular forms and

decoration of Spanish majolica traditions. Jamieson (2004b) notes that the popular New World decorative style of the white tin-enameled background glaze with multi-colored hand-painted designs was an attempt to reproduce aspects of Chinese export porcelain, another popular elite ceramic commodity. Archaeological excavations at La Limpia Concepción showed a significant proportion of Spanish-style majolicas, including a number of imported majolicas from Seville and Panama (Figure 5).

Figure 5: A Panama Blue on White *plato* – excavated from the Victoria site (left) and a locally made majolica *plato* with brown on creamy-white background glaze excavated from the Maria site (right).



Fonte: Evelyn Nimmo.

Along with the presence of Spanish-style majolicas, the excavations in the convent revealed another consistent trend in archaeological studies in Latin America: a vast amount of locally made, undecorated, coarse earthenware which are often associated with indigenous or *mestizo* women working in domestic contexts (DEAGAN, 1987; JAMIESON, 2000). The extensive amount of this type of material excavated from La Limpia Concepción reflects its common use in food preparation, cooking and storing: activities which were all done by the lower class women in the convent. This pattern has become a constant theme in Spanish colonial archaeological studies and generally archaeologists interpret the abundance of undecorated coarse earthenware as a representation of the continuation of indigenous traditional life-ways within Spanish colonial domestic contexts (JAMIESON; SAYRE, 2010). As such, the areas of low-visibility within wealthy Spanish households, such as the kitchens, would have retained the characteristics of Indigenous traditional practices, whereas the public spaces and activities would have adhered more closely to Iberian traditions.

However, the lines between public and private, secular and sacred, masculine and feminine within the convent are blurred and overt displays of wealth were

forbidden. Therefore, the continued use of majolicas within the convent was likely an expression of shared ethnic identity within the private cells of the choir nuns – a space which was accessible only to the nun, her servant, and visitors the nun chose to receive and entertain. Thus, within the intimacy of the private setting it is likely that majolicas were an expression of an affiliation with a shared Spanish ancestry and an adherence to consumer trends, rather than an overt display of wealth and status to the wider religious community. On the other hand the public spaces of the convent were obliged to adhere more strictly to the vows of poverty and obedience which likely required some modesty in terms of table and cooking ware. Therefore, the large collection of undecorated ceramics can be seen as both a continuation of traditional indigenous cooking practices within the convent kitchens, as it is likely that most of the women working in the kitchens were of indigenous descent, as well as the appropriation of these undecorated wares as symbols of the poverty and humility of religious community.

Beyond the use of cooking and tableware, it is important to consider expressions of ethnic identity through the types of foods being prepared and consumed in the convent. Many researchers believe that the consumption of Amerindian foods, especially in the early colonial period, was resisted by colonizers as it was considered crude and unpalatable (ALVES, 1994). However, Jamieson and Sayre (2010) note that there is a complex relationship between colonization and foodways which must consider cultural accommodation rather than a strict dichotomy between Spanish and Indigenous food traditions. The accounts of 1636-38² from La Limpia Concepción demonstrate an interesting mix of both Old World and New World foods that were purchased regularly throughout the year. One item that was purchased frequently and was important in the continuation of Spanish ethnicity and tradition was wheat. In the convent the consumption of wheat would have been essential to the community because of its function in the preparation and administration of the Eucharist. Such a commodity was therefore both a symbol of the sacred and a symbol of Spanish civilization and colonial success. Other Old World food items also appear regularly in the accounts, including barley, fava beans, sugar, salt, honey, and more infrequently preserves of oranges and figs. These items represent an interesting mix of both luxury and basic commodities. Jamieson and Sayre (2010) note that barley, despite being a Eurasian import, was

² AHCC/R, Caja 27, PROT/EP 1640-1641, 477r-528v.

deemed a food for the poor and was likely adopted by indigenous farmers in the Andes because it grew well in the highland climates. On the other hand, the conserves of figs and oranges were a rare item that had clear ties to the Spanish, and more specifically, the Sevillian homeland. The traditional indigenous foods consumed by the convent included quinoa, potatoes, beans (*frijoles*) and maize. The presence of indigenous foodways can suggest a reliance on the traditional knowledge and cooking styles of the women likely working in the convent kitchens. However, it can also suggest a conscious decision by the community to consume ‘poor’ foods, again as a symbol of their vow of poverty. The convent was clearly relying on both Spanish and Indigenous foodways to feed the community and were thus maintaining an unique balance between the necessary poverty of the community and Spanish ‘luxuries’.

CONCLUSION

The religious life of a nun was meant to be solitary and severe; the ideal was for nuns to spend their time outside of prayer in silent contemplation, through their own personal devotion to saints or relics, through meditation in their private space or gardens, and through devotional work. The reality was that despite the ecclesiastical desire for a solitary and quiet life inside the convent, the women living within were using their environment to express their various forms of identity. Within private spaces, the choir nuns could create a sense of shared ethnic identity by using and displaying material culture and food that were distinct from the rest of the community. But because the convent was meant to be a space devoid of excesses and overt wealth, the choir nuns had to be creative in how difference was displayed. By examining shared material culture, such as sewing implements and tableware, we can see real distinctions between the items likely used by women of Spanish descent and those used by lower-class and non-Spanish women. However, unlike in the secular household of the colonial city, these displays had to be hidden within the most private spaces of the convent.

The use of foods and ceramics that reflect continuing adherence to indigenous traditions in the convent also demonstrates an interesting manipulation of the material culture. While we can interpret the continued use of traditional indigenous foods and cooking and serving vessels as an expression of the ethnic identities of the large

population of indigenous women living within the convent walls, we can also see the use of these items in the public spaces of the convent as a deliberate demonstration of the adherence to a life of poverty and severity. The accounts from the convent clearly show the use of both 'poor' foods, such as barley and quinoa, but they also demonstrate adherence to Spanish traditions of wheat and fruit preserves. Therefore, in the public spaces of the convent it was necessary to maintain the appearance of poverty but in the private and sacred spaces small luxuries were permitted.

Archaeological research in La Limpia Concepción demonstrates the kind of insight we can gain into religious life in colonial society and can add much to our understanding of how such institutions functioned and how those living within could express their own individual and group identities to the interior and exterior worlds. Such research also highlights the importance of these institutions in the maintenance and continuation of the colonial hierarchy and hegemony. Religious institutions, and by extension religion and spirituality, were inextricably linked with ethnic and class identities. Linking spirituality with the Spanish elite reinforced their ruling position within colonial society and this hierarchy was embraced by the women living in La Limpia Concepción. Rather than transcending the colonial mentality, these women chose to hold on to their position in society, reinforce the hierarchies that existed, and in so doing help to legitimate the Spanish as rightful rulers of the new lands. Archaeological excavations conducted at La Limpia Concepción convent demonstrate that archaeological research adds new layers to discussions of colonial life not only within monastic communities, but in colonial society as a whole.

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