

TOWARD A REGIONAL DEFINITION OF IDOLATRY:
REEXAMINING IDOLATRY TRIALS IN THE
“*RELACIONES DE MÉRITOS*” AND THEIR ROLE
IN DEFINING THE CONCEPT OF “*IDOLATRIA*” IN
COLONIAL YUCATÁN, 1570-1780*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the limitations and validity of the document genre of autobiographical and service narratives of colonial clergymen called *Relaciones de Méritos y Servicios* and their role in defining colonial concepts of idolatry. It addresses the issues of clerical exaggeration and the use of testimony as a political weapon, two frequently raised critiques of their historical validity. Examining a large number of these *Relaciones de Méritos*, placing them in the context of their author's ecclesiastical careers, and contemplating the clerics' intentions in writing them, this paper will argue for revalidating the use of this documentary genre in ethnohistorical discourse. In the course of this examination, the paper will demonstrate the value of these *Relaciones* in studying the regional evolution of colonial perceptions of idolatry as a coherent category of ecclesiastical offense.

... Because I am fluent in the said Maya language, I have taken from the natives idols with which they committed idolatry and I wish to make testimony of this fact and of the trials because I want to present this before Our Lord, the King and His Royal Council of the Indies so that according to my merits they should award me in these provinces with a benefice and post worthy of my services. ...

—Padre Baltazar de Herrera, 1598¹

Abbreviations

- AGI Archivo General de Indias, Seville
AGN Archivo General de la Nación, México
AHAY Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado de Yucatán, Mérida
AHN Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid, Spain

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¹ See *Carta y Petición hecho por el Vicario Baltazar de Herrera ante la visita del Juez de Comisión Ambrosio de Arguelles*, 1 de marzo, 1598, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 292, 3 folios.

In late November 1600, Padre Baltazar de Herrera sat nervously outside of the audience chambers of the Royal Council of the Indies in Seville, Spain. A parish priest and ecclesiastical judge of a local episcopal court in the far off province of Yucatán, Herrera had come to Spain with the license of the governor of Yucatán.² The purpose of his long voyage was an audience with the Council of the Indies and the King during which he would present evidence showing his valuable merits and services to the Church and the Crown. Clutched tightly in his hands he held a voluminous dossier composed of several hundred folio-sized pages of documentation, testimony and trial transcripts. His ultimate goal was obviously one of self-promotion. He presented his dossier in order to apply for a promotion in the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the diocese.³ His family's merits and his own services, he hoped, would enable him to gain a higher post.⁴ However, the contents of his voluminous dossier, called a *Relación de Méritos y Servicios*, served as testimony to much more than his own self-promotion. As proof of his zeal and his service to the Church, his resume contained juridical proof of acts the clergy considered instances of Maya "idolatry."⁵ More importantly,

² The governor had given Padre Baltazar de Herrera permission to present his *Relación de Méritos y Servicios* [hereafter abbreviated as RDM] before the King and the Council of the Indies. See *Licencia del Gobernador de Yucatán Don Diego Fernandez de Velasco para que Baltazar de Herrera vaya a España, 1600*, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 292, 3 folios.

³ On his behalf, García Morejon presented Herrera's first petition before the provincial governor of Yucatán on March 3, 1597. See *Petición con poder de Garcia de Morejon por parte del Padre Baltazar de Herrera, cura beneficiado del partido de Peto*, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 292, 4 folios. Morejon also presented a copy of Herrera's Interrogatory of seventeen questions in which he requested that witnesses testify. The reason for the petition: "... He has the necessity of making a *probanza* [literally: proof] *ad perpetuum rei memorian* so that with it he can prove his merits and services so that His Majesty may reward him..." [folio 1].

⁴ Gabriela Ramos analyzed the *Relacion de Meritos y Servicios* of priests in Peru to examine the extirpation of idolatry in the Andes. She saw the importance of these RDMs as a means of "... reaching the rich *prebendas*, permitting them to accumulate merits so that after they were recognized they would take them to the most desirable posts in ecclesiastical and civil administration..." She also came to the conclusion that as historical sources these RDMs are extremely valuable. See Hugo Urbano and Gabriela Ramos, *Catolicismo y Extirpación de Idolatrías: Siglos XVI-XVIII* (Cuzco, 1993), 25-26.

⁵ The Spanish crown itself proclaimed that higher posts in the ecclesiastical hierarchy would be preferentially reserved for clerics who were "educated, had served in Cathedral churches, or extirpated idolatries." According to the Crown's own criteria, the extirpation of native idolatry was one of the most important merits a priest could claim. See *Recopilación de Leyes de los Reynos de las Indias*, Libro I, Titulo VI, Del Patronazgo Real de las Indias, "Ley V: Que en las presentaciones de prebendas sean preferidos los Letrados graduados, y los que hubieren servido en Iglesias Catedrales, *extirpacion de idolatrías* y en las Doctrinas..." The law required proof of the cleric's zeal, and written

there are hints and keys for modern scholars attempting to understand the religious conflicts between Spanish priests and their Maya parishioners. At the same time, Padre Herrera's dossier contains clues to the changing definitions of what the crime of idolatry entailed in the minds of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century ecclesiastical authorities.

The dossiers brought to Spain by clergymen returning from the Americas, like Padre Baltazar de Herrera, provide the information, details, and insights needed to understand complex issues of continuity and change in colonial Maya religion. They also show the evolving attitudes and reactions that Catholic clerics demonstrated toward pre-Columbian religion. "Accidental ethnographies," the juridical evidence of Maya idolatry found in these testimonies and trial transcripts serve as a valuable historical narrative, to be examined and utilized by modern historical and anthropological scholars.

Critiquing the Sources: Historical Analysis of the Genre

Baltazar de Herrera would not be the only parish priest or ecclesiastical judge from the province of Yucatán to make the perilous journey to Spain. Throughout the colonial period, close to a hundred priests and friars from the province would personally bring their dossiers to Spain to prove their merits and services.⁶ More than seven hundred

transcripts of the idolatry trials were frequently submitted as evidence. But since extirpation of idolatry was the duty of all parish priests and *vicarios*, only exceptional cases in which the priest put his own life in danger were considered worthy of extra attention. In the rural parishes of the Yucatán peninsula, such as the Vicaria of Cozumel, danger appeared a constant threat. Almost all of the *Vicarios* of the Island of Cozumel commented on the dangers and resistance of the Maya of that island. They also all commented on the dangers of crossing over to the island in an open canoe. Seldom did the parish priests have confidence in their native assistants, because they all complained of attempts to drown them. Apparently there was some truth to their claims. In 1586, padre Baltazar de Herrera's predecessor, Padre Cristobal de Asencio was drowned by his Maya assistants as they rowed him to the island. As late as 1627, Padre Nicolas de Tapia wrote that, "the natives on the island and the coast are so fierce that they have drowned and killed several of their ministers and this is a risk that I undertook many times as I crossed over to the island . . ." [AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 305, 4 folios].

⁶ Many other prominent priests and ecclesiastics who served as zealous extirpators of traditional Maya religion also made the journey to Spain to present their merits and services before the Crown. Dr. Francisco Ruiz (1600), Br. Andres Fernandez de Castro (1590), Antonio de Arroyo (1599), Dr. Pedro Sanchez de Aguilar (1600, 1614) and many more presented similar large dossiers or RDMs before the Crown and the Council. For a longer list of Yucatec clergymen who wrote and presented RDMs, see the list in the appendix and bibliography in John F. Chuchiak, "The Indian Inquisition and the

other priests and clerics sent dossiers to Spain with an agent or procurator.⁷ Padre Herrera's large dossier, or *Relación*, contains several hundred folios of documentation, including testimonies, letters of recommendation, and, most importantly for our examination here, complete transcripts of several idolatry trials that he conducted as the local ecclesiastical judge.⁸

Relaciones de Méritos y Servicios, were submitted by civil as well as ecclesiastical officials. In a recent article, Murdo Macleod skillfully analyzed a corpus of these documents, examining the origins, content, format of the genre, and suggesting possible uses for modern scholars.⁹ My own research into the subcategory of ecclesiastical *Relaciones de Méritos* enabled me to use documents in this genre as "accidental ethnographies" in the study of colonial Yucatec Maya religious practices.¹⁰

The procedures for compiling one of these dossiers began with a petition requesting permission to begin a process of compilation that could

Extirpation of Idolatry: The Process of Punishment in the Ecclesiastical Courts of the *Provisorato de Indios* in Yucatán, 1563-1812," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Tulane University, 2000).

⁷ As a standard document genre, the *Relaciones de Méritos y Servicios* of priests and clergymen from the diocese of Yucatán commonly contained the following: 1) Letter or petition giving a narrative description of the priest's merits and services; 2) Interrogatory of questions to ask witnesses; 3) Testimony of anywhere from three to ten witnesses; 4) Supporting documents such as licenses, titles of ordination, commissions from Bishops, Provisors or other ecclesiastical superiors to conduct special missions or business; 5) Certified copies or transcripts of trials or investigations, or other judicial documents executed by the petitioner as an ecclesiastical judge or investigator; 6) Letters of certification or recommendation from Episcopal Visitors, Bishops, the Cathedral Chapter and the local Provincial governor; 7) Documents pertaining to the merits and services of the priest's father, mother, or relatives—these are considered his "merits" by birth; and 8) Other supporting documents that proved the priest's personal merits and services. For the argument of this paper, documents pertaining to #5 are the most important. In many cases, the episcopal archives from which these certified copies came were later destroyed. These certified copies of idolatry trials, with their detailed testimonies and confessions, serve as some of the only surviving descriptions of colonial Maya religion.

⁸ For a list of some of the more important cases of idolatry trials and testimonies included in the *Relaciones de Méritos* of clergymen see note 54 below.

⁹ See Murdo J. Macleod, "Self-Promotion: The Relaciones de Méritos y Servicios and Their Historical and Political Interpretation," *Colonial Latin American Historical Review* 76/1 (Winter 1998): 25-42. Macleod is one of the first to examine the medieval and Iberian origins of this documentary genre, based on medieval understandings of the reciprocal and mutual obligations between the Spanish kings and their loyal subjects who offer valuable services to the crown.

¹⁰ Starting in 1993, I began to use a large corpus of these *Relaciones de Méritos* (*RDMs*) as sources of valuable information on colonial Maya religious practices. By examining several hundred *RDMs* of colonial Yucatecan priests and friars, I was able to uncover valuable information on continued pre-Hispanic Maya religion. See John F. Chuchiak, "In the Path of the Rain-god Chac: The Persistence of Paganism and Maya Resistance

take months or even years.¹¹ The Crown by no means accepted these documents at face value. Instead, royal law dictated procedures to check the veracity of the material that had been given in testimony and solicited by interrogatory throughout the whole process.¹² First, the petitioner or his procurator had to certify the contents of the *Relaciones de Méritos y Servicios* in public before the local governor, a notary and witnesses.¹³ Next, the governor conducted a “secret *probanza*” or *Probanza de Oficio*, to verify the accuracy of a petitioner’s personal *Relación*.¹⁴ The governor’s secret investigation into the “proof” of a priest’s merits and services often included a separate interrogatory of his own design which was submitted to witnesses not named by the petitioning priest.¹⁵

to Franciscan Missionary Efforts in Yucatán, 1545-1786,” (M.A. Thesis, Tulane University, 1994). I have consulted more than six hundred RDMs of clergymen in the diocese of Yucatán, and have uncovered information that has enabled me to reconstruct colonial Maya religion and examine the conflicts between Maya tradition and colonial Catholicism. See John F. Chuchiak, “The Indian Inquisition and the Extirpation of Idolatry.” Even with the various questions concerning their reliability as historical sources—including the obvious criticism that they are produced by clergymen who are “shamelessly promoting their self-interest”—the RDMs certainly contain valuable eye-witness accounts relating to colonial Maya religious practices.

¹¹ Murdo Macleod does not examine the actual process of compiling the RDM; he only hints at some of the processes involved in conducting the *probanza*: “Self-Promotion: The *Relaciones de Méritos y Servicios* and Their Historical and Political Interpretation,” 25-27.

¹² According to Royal Law, priests or clerics who sought appointment to a higher ecclesiastical post had to “appear before the Viceroy, President or Audiencia, or before the superior governing power of the province and declare their intentions by means of a petition and then give information concerning their quality, letters, customs and abilities. . . .” See *Recopilación de Leyes de las Indias*, Libro I, Título VI, Ley XVIII.

¹³ Royal Law controlled even the form of the initial petition and the order in which the substantiating documentation was attached or appended to the *Relación*. See *Recopilación de Leyes de Las Indias*, Libro II, Título XVI, Ley VI “Que pone la forma en que los Vireyes, Presidentes, Gobernadores y Ministros han de escribir al Rey.” Royal law dictated an entire procedure to verify the veracity of the material given in testimony and solicited by interrogatory throughout the process.

¹⁴ For detailed descriptions of the diplomatics of these types of documents and their weight as bonafide legal documents see José Real Díaz, *Estudio Diplomático del Documento Indiano* (Sevilla, 1970).

¹⁵ As a check on the veracity and accuracy of a petitioner’s RDM, the Crown authorized the viceroys, audiencias, and local governors to “conduct another *probanza de oficio*.” Along with this secret *probanza*, the law required the local secular official to send “their own opinion on the petition and send it apart from that of the petitioner along with the approval of the local Prelate with his perceptions. . . .” According to law, any petition or *Relación de Méritos* that did not have this secret information sent to back it up would be invalid. The law stated that, “. . . without this diligence the people who petition for a dignity, benefice or other ecclesiastical office will not be admitted to candidacy. . . .” See *Recopilación de Leyes de las Indias*, Libro I, Título VI, Ley XIX “Que los Prelados envien en todas las Flotas relacion de las Prebendas y Beneficios vacos, y de los Sacerdotes benemeritos, y que diligencias han de preceder á la presentación” (folio 41).

The many checks and counter checks of the factual and narrative material presented in a *Probanza* or *Relación de Méritos* make these documents some of the more reliable colonial documentary sources available to the modern scholar. Personal and official letters, written in private beyond the scrutiny of one's enemies, would often contain biased and unchecked information. The entire process of compiling a *Relación*, on the other hand, occurred in public before the local governor, a royal scribe and other witnesses. Easily refutable claims and testimony would be discovered and thrown out at the beginning.

Thus, the first level of checking on the veracity of testimony and documents submitted in a *Probanza* lay with the provincial governors. Since they were often open enemies of the priests involved, the provincial governors scrutinized the *Relaciones* with particular care. The rivalry between civil and ecclesiastical officials is in itself a further reason for thinking that the final product of a *Probanza* or *Relación* contained material with an exceptional degree of historical accuracy.

Moreover, if provincial governors or any other royal officials discovered, at a later date, some scandalous behavior on the part of the priest, or some factual error in his *Relación*, the Crown encouraged them to report it.¹⁶ New information could be sent on at any time after the initial *Probanza*, and a *Relación* discovered to contain inaccuracies or other unverified claims would be thrown out. The burden of proof lay with the priest.

In addition, local ecclesiastical authorities also minutely scrutinized the documents produced for a *Relación* for their veracity. Ecclesiastical notaries and the bishop's general secretary, the *Secretario de Camara*, regularly cross-checked the petitioners' copies of trials and other witness testimony against the original trial proceedings housed in the diocesan archive, known as the *Archivo de la Curia Eclesiástica*. No document was certified if it did not match the original documents. Then, even this certification was checked and authorized by another public notary to ensure accuracy.

To be sure, the court records themselves are not immune from criticism. Recent scholars such as Inga Clendinnen and Dennis Tedlock have challenged the veracity and value of ecclesiastical court documents

¹⁶ The Crown required that if the Viceroy, audiencias, or governors discovered any misdeed or other error in the character or actions of the candidates presenting *Relaciones*, they should send a report of the misdeed to the Crown. See *Recopilación de Leyes de las Indias*, Libro III, Título XIII, Ley XXXI "Que los Vireyes, Presidentes y Prelados avisen si los propuestos mudaren de estado y estimación."

for the ethnohistory of indigenous people.¹⁷ But under close examination, the evidence presented in a majority of these documents withstands the test of historical criticism.

The detractors' first argument seems to be that the documents written and supervised by clergymen will necessarily have a clerical bias. But while the clergymen may have consciously or unconsciously exaggerated the extent of Maya idolatry, the evidence given in the court records is corroborated by Maya as well as Spanish informants, and in most cases by inventories or certified descriptions of material evidence, such as wooden, clay or stone idols that had been confiscated.¹⁸ Often the extirpators sent along the actual objects confiscated and preserved, such as Maya codices, priestly garments, offerings and sacrificial implements. At least one of the four major surviving Maya codices was confiscated during one of these idolatry trials conducted by Dr. Pedro Sanchez de Aguilar: the codex confiscated from the town of Cehac in 1607 and later sent back to Spain is now known as the Madrid Codex.¹⁹

A second argument given by Clendinnen and Tedlock is that confessions were coerced under threat of torture. The juridical use of torture was indeed a common practice throughout the early modern world in both civil and ecclesiastical courts.²⁰ In Spanish America, by law all ecclesiastical documents submitted to superior courts had to mention whether torture was applied, following permission by civil officials. Even

¹⁷ See Dennis Tedlock, "Terror in the Archives: Mayans Meet Europeans," *American Anthropologist* 95 (1993): 139-152. Also see Inga Clendinnen, "Reading the Inquisitorial Record in Yucatan: Fact or Fantasy?" *The Americas* 28/3 (1982): 327-347; Clendinnen, "Disciplining the Indians: Franciscan Ideology and Missionary Violence in Sixteenth-Century Yucatan" *Past & Present* 94 (1984): 27-49; and finally Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatán, 1517-1570* (Cambridge, 1987).

¹⁸ For examples see *Inventario de los ydolos confiscados*, 1721, AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 789, Exp. 31; also see *Certificación del recibo de los ydolos hecho por el secretario del Obispo*, 20 de Mayo 1721, AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 789, Exp. 31, folio 559v.

¹⁹ For descriptions of the confiscation of this codex see *Testimonio de Gregorio de Aguilar, presbítero, en la ynformación presentado por el Doctor Pedro Sanchez de Aguilar*, 6 de diciembre, 1608, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 299, 8 folios; also see *Testimonio del capitan don Juan Chan yndio principal del pueblo de Chancenote, en la probanza de los méritos y servicios del Dr. Pedro Sanchez de Aguilar*, 5 de noviembre, 1608, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 299, 5 folios; *Testimonio de Don Francisco Chan, gobernador del pueblo de Cehac, en la probanza de los méritos y servicios del Dr. Pedro Sanchez de Aguilar*, 5 de noviembre, 1608, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 299, 6 folios.

²⁰ For the use of torture in eliciting confessions and juridical proof in early modern European civil and ecclesiastical courts, see John H. Langbein, *Torture and the Law of Proof: Europe and England in the Ancient Regime* (Chicago, 1977); also see Edward Peters, *Torture* (New York, 1985), for a discussion of the Western origins of the use of torture in judicial proceedings.

Fr. Diego de Landa during his infamous *auto de fe* in Mani could not have used juridical torture without the complicity of the *alcalde mayor*, Don Diego de Quijada.²¹ But most documents of Maya confessions do not mention the juridical use of torture, and only very rarely is there evidence that ecclesiastical judges administered torture without obtaining the appropriate permission. The number of cases of Maya prisoners later complaining of abuse is relatively small.²² In most instances, moreover, the local investigating judge was often the only Spaniard in the region. An ecclesiastical judge often had to rely on Maya town officials in his extirpation campaigns. In outlying regions ecclesiastical judges also had to rely on Maya scribes as their official notaries in idolatry cases. In effect, the isolation of the local parish priest or ecclesiastical judge precluded the use of torture. As one parish priest in colonial Yucatan stated, "I am a lone island of Spanish civilization amongst a furious sea of idolatrous natives. . . ."²³ Finally, the consistency across time and geographical distances of Maya testimony concerning the deities and rituals of Maya religion belies the argument that their testimony was falsified, invented or coerced.

Finally, Clendinnen, Tedlock, and others contend that the clergy themselves had much to gain by over-reporting cases of idolatry, because such reports made them look good in the eyes of Spanish administrators. The truth is that the clergy had much to lose if reports of widespread idolatry in their districts persisted. Although zealous action in extirpating idolatry could be and often was used to justify one's "merits and services" to Church and Crown, reports of continued idolatry were a double-edged sword. Priests and friars in districts with high incidences

²¹ The complicity of the *alcalde mayor* of Yucatán, Don Diego Quijada, was an important factor in support of Fr. Diego de Landa's use of torture against the Maya. The friars themselves rarely inflicted juridical torture on witnesses. See *Don Diego Quijada*, ed. France Scholes and Eleanor Adams (Mexico City, 1938), Introduction, *passim*. In later years, the governors of Yucatán were reluctant to aid the ecclesiastical authorities in the administration of torture in their trials. They even stepped in on occasions when reports of abuses on the part of the friars and priests occurred. See *Auto y demando del gobernador Don Carlos de Luna y Arellano, contra el obispo y sus jueces eclesiásticos por usurpar la jurisdicción real*, 5 de marzo, 1611, AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 290, Exp. 2.

²² For one of the few examples of the unwarranted use of torture during the taking of testimony and confessions, see *Testimonio ante el Santo Oficio del herrero Alvaro Chan sobre los abusos que le hizo Fr. Juan de Santa Maria*, 9 de octubre, 1613, AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 302, Exp. 11, folios 204r-214v; also see *Testimonio de Ana Cahun ante el Santo Oficio sobre los abusos y amenazas que le hizo Fr. Juan de Santa Maria*, 9 de octubre, 1613, AGN, Inquisición, Vol. 302, Exp. 11.

²³ See AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 303.

of recurring idolatry were often removed from office.²⁴ Sometimes the clergy were accused of being the root causes of Maya idolatry.²⁵ Many of the extirpators' petitions for ecclesiastical advancement were denied regardless of their apparent merit and services in the extirpation, and yet they continued to discover and report cases of idolatry. We must also remember that Fr. Diego de Landa's own trouble with the crown came from being overly zealous in his 1562 campaign of extirpation. Many later Franciscan friars and prelates received similar reprimands for their participation in the extirpation of idolatry.²⁶ Even after being rebuked, the friars continued to pursue cases against Maya idolatry that came to their attention. They therefore had little to gain from reporting acts of idolatry or aiding in campaigns of extirpation.

The same was true for the secular clergy. In Yaxcaba in 1686, the local curate reported a case of idolatry even though he knew that it would have adverse effects on his own tenure in office.²⁷ Where reports

²⁴ Even Baltazar de Herrera, the zealous *vicario* whose punishment of Francisco Pech for idolatry is discussed here, was later removed from another post upon news of continued idolatry. Many other extirpators [such as Dr. Francisco Ruiz in 1607] were similarly removed from their posts, or transferred, when continued idolatry was discovered after their campaigns of extirpation. For further discussion of cases of extirpation see John F. Chuchiak, "The Indian Inquisition and the Extirpation of Idolatry: The Process of Punishment in the *Provisorato de Indios*, 1563-1821."

²⁵ *Carta del Dr. Sancho del Puerto, Juez Provisor, sobre sus relaciones de méritos y servicios y su castigo de la ydolatría entre los yndios durante el tiempo del Obispo Juan Cano*, 20 de marzo, 1715, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 1032, 3 folios. While serving as the *Juez Provisor*, Dr. Sancho del Puerto blamed the massive amount of continued Maya idolatry on the clergy themselves. He wrote, "... the cause of idolatry being so deeply rooted in these miserable Indians of this province, I cannot offer any other reason than one and that is the scant vigilance and carelessness of the ministers, both regular and secular, in soliciting the salvation of their flock . . . each one being more distracted in their own interests and advancement at the cost of these poor Indians . . ." (folio 2).

²⁶ See especially, *Autos hechos por el Mariscal Don Carlos de Luna y Arellano sobre que el Padre Fr. Juan de Cieza, abuso a los indios, contiene las dichas diligencias* 1608, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 129, 58 folios; see also, *Autos hechos sobre que se castiguen los delitos y excesos de Fr. Rodrigo Colonia, Fr. Francisco Torralba, y Fr. Francisco Gutiérrez, del orden de San Francisco, por tener cepos y carceles contra los leyes de Su Magestad*, 1608, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 129, 56 folios; and finally *Denuncia del principal del pueblo de Dzonotake, Don Melchor Na, quejándose de Fr. Pedro de Rúa, por tener cepos y carceles y azotar a los indios de su pueblo* 1608, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 129, 15 folios. Later Franciscan Provincials were criticized for their part in extirpating idolatry, even when they had the permission of the bishops. See *Petición de Fr. Hernando de Nava, sobre sus méritos y servicios en la reducción de los indios infieles y el castigo de la idolatría en la provincia de Yucatan*, 14 de febrero, 1617, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 3167, 30 folios. For other Franciscan extirpators and their own problems, see *Relación de los méritos y servicios de Fr. Antonio de Ramírez*, AGI, Indiferente General, 192, 10 folios.

²⁷ *Memorial y autos del cura y vicario del partido de Yaxcaba, Dr. Alonso de Padilla, sobre la*

of idolatry were widespread, the bishops and governors reacted by redistributing Maya towns and breaking up large parishes to form smaller ones. Local priests would lose a good deal in terms of annual revenue if their parishes were divided because of recurrent idolatry. Yet when parishes were broken up in the seventeenth century, causing a loss of income to local parish priests and *vicarios*, they continued nonetheless to report and proceed against cases of Maya idolatry.²⁸

No matter what the personal motive behind these reports of idolatry may have been, the physical evidence inventoried in the reports and sent along to the local bishop makes it clear that the Maya engaged in acts the clergy labeled "idolatry." They routinely participated in public worship of traditional deities. For the study of this phenomenon, the documents and idolatry trials contained in the *Relaciones de Méritos* are an extraordinarily valuable resource.

The Concept of Idolatry in the Early Modern World

Before examining the idolatry trials contained within the *Relaciones de Méritos*, it is necessary to first define the contemporary concepts of idolatry in the early modern world. The colonial Spanish term *idolatria*, or idolatry, as generally understood by the Catholic clergy meant: "the adoration or cult that gentiles give to creatures or statues of their false gods."²⁹ To commit idolatry, according to colonial sources meant "to worship idols, or give reverence and adoration to statues, figures and persons which is only due to God."³⁰ Formulas of this kind trace back to codifications of idolatry at councils and synods of the medieval Catholic Church.³¹ But these simple definitions masked a more complex reality.

idolatria de su partido, 7 de enero, 1686, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 369, 2 folios. Also see *Carta y consulta del obispo de Yucatán, Juan Cano y Sandoval, sobre el beneficio de Yaxaca y la idolatria en el pueblo de Tixcacal*, 8 de enero, 1686, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 369, 1 folio.

²⁸ For examples of these major relocations of parishes for recurrent idolatry, see *Documentos sobre la división del beneficio de la villa de Valladolid*, 5 de febrero, 1686, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 369, folios 928-935; *Documentos sobre la división del beneficio y partido de Ychmul*, Febrero, 1686, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 369, folios 936-943; and *Documentos sobre la división del beneficio y partido de Tihotzuc*, 5 de febrero, 1686, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 369, folios 944-951.

²⁹ *Diccionario de Autoridades*, 1734, folio 204.

³⁰ *Diccionario de Autoridades*, 1734, folio 204.

³¹ For discussions of these medieval concepts and their impact on the Spanish colonization and conversion of the natives of the New World, see Sabine MacCormack, "Ubi Ecclesia? Perceptions of Medieval Europe in Spanish America," *Speculum* 69/1 (1994): 74-100.

In fact, all of the monotheistic religions struggled to define idolatry. Since biblical times, Jewish judges and theologians struggled to determine what constituted violations of God's first and second commandments as given to Moses.³² Early modern Islamic philosophers and judges battled over what constituted "idolatry."³³ The *Qur'an* defined "idolatry" as a sin that merited death, and the eighth century Islamic Inquisition, or *Mihna*, established by the Caliph al-Ma'mun, was an attempt to enforce Islamic orthodoxy and to punish heretical beliefs, including idolatry.³⁴ Protestant reformers condemned the Catholic cult of saints as idolatrous, but Martin Luther agonized over the exact definition of idolatry and all that it encompassed.³⁵

Although many scholars have dealt with various aspects of the campaign to extirpate idolatry in Spanish America, only a few have attempted to define and place into local perspective the actual sixteenth- to eighteenth-century notions of idolatry. Nicholas Griffiths describes the nature and concept of idolatry in relationship to superstition,³⁶ while Sabine MacCormack analyzes contemporary colonial concepts of "idolatry" as they related to colonial clergymen's perceptions of Andean religion.³⁷ Still, Kenneth Mills's work perhaps accords best with my own ideas on the use of the term idolatry.³⁸ Although it is helpful to read the works of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, the ideological

³² For several studies on Hebrew and Jewish concepts of idolatry and their evolution see Elford Higgins, *Hebrew idolatry and superstition: its place in folk-lore* (Port Washington, N.Y., 1971); for a discussion of Jewish commandments and laws concerning idolatry see Josef Stern, *Problems and parables of law [electronic resource]: Maimonides and Nahmanides on reasons for the commandments (ta'amei ha-mitzvot)* (Albany, 1998).

³³ For the development of the concept of idolatry in Islam see G.R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge, 1999).

³⁴ Walter Melville Patton, *Ahmed ibn Hanbal and the Mihna: A Biography of the Imam Including an Account of the Mohammedan Inquisition called the Mihna* (Leiden, 1897); also see Nimrod Hurvitz, "The Mihna (Inquisition), State and Religion in the Early 'Abbasid Era'" *Hamizrah Hehadash* 42 (2001): 17-24. For a more recent discussion of the Islamic Inquisition see John Turner, "Inquisition and the Definition of Identity in Early Abbasid History," (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 2001).

³⁵ For Martin Luther's views on idolatry and the polemic see *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, ed. and trans. William Hazlitt, vol. 6 (Philadelphia, [1822] 1998). Similarly, Luther expounded on his ideas concerning idolatry in his catechisms. See Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, trans. F. Bente and W.H.T. Dau (St. Louis, 1921), 565-773.

³⁶ See Nicholas Griffiths, *The Cross and the Serpent: Religious Repression and Resurgence in Colonial Peru* (Norman, OK, 1996), especially Chapter 1.

³⁷ See Sabine MacCormack, *Religion in the Andes: Vision and Imagination in Early Colonial Peru* (Princeton, 1991).

³⁸ See Kenneth Mills, *Idolatry and Its Enemies: Colonial Andean Religion and Extirpation, 1640-1750* (Princeton, 1997), especially 3, 7, 10, 34, 196-197.

study of the significance of the term “idolatry” in the colonial era has to start with a critical analysis of contemporary documents.

According to David Tavárez (in this volume, pages 116-117), “colonial idolatry emerged as a coherent category only when both native and ecclesiastical minds willed it into existence.” In the case of Yucatán, unraveling what the concept of idolatry meant to the Spanish soldiers and clergy who first encountered the Maya is not easy.³⁹ As Tavárez rightly notes, the idea held different meanings for natives and Spaniards. Hence, it is necessary to place the contemporary understanding of the term for both the extirpators and those found guilty of committing “idolatry” into a conceptual framework.

To begin with the terminology, the word *latria* signifies “a human act pertaining to the worship of God;” it also denotes the same concept as “religion.”⁴⁰ Thus, *Idol-latria* has the meaning of “human actions pertaining to the worship of images or idols” or in other words “the religion of idols.” Christians have always considered idolatry as the “worst of all sins.”⁴¹ Nevertheless, from the earliest days of Christianity, idolatry became linked not just to the worship of graven images, but also to superstition. St. Augustine identified idolatry as a form of superstition when he stated that “anything invented by man for making and worshipping idols, or for giving divine worship to a creature or any part of a creature, is superstitious.”⁴² Superstition was understood as a confession of “unbelief by external worship.” St. Thomas Aquinas wrote in his *Summa Theologiae*:

Idolatry is the most grievous sin. For just as the most heinous crime in an earthly commonwealth would seem to be for a man to give royal honor to another than the true king . . . so, in sins that are committed against God, which indeed are the greater sins, the greatest of all seems to be for a man to give God’s honor to a creature [idol], since . . . He sets up another god in the world, and lessens the divine sovereignty. . . .⁴³

These early definitions were transmitted to the New World through the writings of sixteenth-century Spanish theologians and scholars. One important treatise, that of Pedro Ciruelo, had a profound impact on

³⁹ See Griffiths, *The Cross and the Serpent*, Chapter 1.

⁴⁰ For a complete discussion of Christian concepts of idolatry, see St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Part II, II, Question 94, Article I: *Is idolatry a species of superstition?*

⁴¹ See discussion of St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae, Question 94a, 4 Resp.

⁴² See St. Augustine of Hippo, *De Doctrina Christiana*, ii, 20.

⁴³ See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Part II, II, Question 94, Article 3: *Is idolatry the gravest sin?*

the thinking of the early missionaries in colonial Mexico and also played a major role in shaping European conceptions of idolatry in the same period. Like Augustine, Ciruelo equated superstition with idolatry and stated that “. . . both are most displeasing to God, and most harmful to men.”⁴⁴

The first Franciscan missionaries who arrived in Yucatán carried with them this traditional notion of the evils of idolatry. They, and the secular clergy that followed them, would put these ideas to use in their campaigns against the persistence of native religion. What the Peruvian scholar Hugo Urbano has written about the focus of the contact between the native Amerindian cultures of the Andes and Spanish Catholicism rings true for colonial Yucatán as well:

Catholicism was born in the Andes out of the open struggle against idolatry, and from the moment the first Spaniard, secular or religious, set foot on American soil, he did nothing else, in respect to the religious dimension, but extirpate idolatries. . . .⁴⁵

The theme of idolatry and extirpation predominates in all of the letters, correspondence, official documents, and pastoral visits and commissions from Yucatán. Throughout the 300-year history of Spanish occupation, no other theme is given so much attention.

Although scholars such as Serge Gruzinski and Carmen Bernand have argued that colonial ecclesiastical authorities identified idolatry as “the falsified reflection of religion,” the truth is more nebulous.⁴⁶ In the diocese of Yucatán, for instance, some of the earliest ecclesiastical decrees acknowledged that the Mayas’ idols spoke and offered the natives promises and other inducements to continue their worship. Apparently, in colonial Yucatán the Catholic clergy did not deny the powers of the Mayas’ idols or images of their gods, rather they attributed these powers to the workings of the devil.

Not only was the devil the main proponent of idolatry, he also created the worship of graven images in order to steal away from God the worship that was rightfully his. The early friars viewed the demons

⁴⁴ Eugene A. Maio and D’Orsay W. Pearson, *Pedro Ciruelo’s ‘A Treatise Reproving All Supersticiones and Forms of Witchcraft: Very Necessary and Useful for All Good Christians Zealous for Their Salvation’* (London, 1977), 77.

⁴⁵ See Hugo Urbano and Gabriela Ramos, “Idolos, figuras, imágenes: La representación como discurso ideológico” in *Catolicismo y Extirpación de Idolatrías: Siglos XVI-XVIII*, 8.

⁴⁶ See Carmen Bernand and Serge Gruzinski, *De la Idolatría: una arqueología de las ciencias religiosas* (Mexico, 1992), passim.

as “inhabiting” the idols of the Amerindians, believing that it was under their influence that the natives had created these images for worship. Idolatry, then, was a glorification of the devil and his legion of demons. The first bishop of Yucatán, Fr. Francisco Toral instructed his parish priests to:

Abominate the things of the Devil and exhort all of them [the Indians] not to believe in the idols nor place hope in their promises, but rather to know them for stones, wood and clay in which there are demons who trick and deceive men. . . .⁴⁷

Thus, the bishop too did not deny the power of the idols, nor insist that they were merely inanimate objects, rather he attributed their powers and promises, and other interactions with the Maya to the work of the devil. The devil used trickery to lure them away from the Church and the “True God.” Therefore, the early friars seemed to give the devil the credit for the invention of “abominable ceremonies of idolatry and human sacrifice.”⁴⁸ It is interesting to note that the direct Maya translation of the Spanish term “devil,” *cizin*, came to be used for all of the Mayas’ pre-Hispanic deities, religious images, and even rituals.⁴⁹ Franciscan colonial dictionaries contain many words like *pay cizin* [to call the devil], *tanlah cizin* [to serve the devil], *u uin bal cizin* [the figure of the devil, idol, or image].⁵⁰

Because of their “rudeness” and their status as neophytes, the Maya were seen by some as easy prey for the devil and his horde of demons. Even in the seventeenth century, Fr. Diego López de Cogolludo lamented, “May God comfort the fragility of these Indians, for the Devil tricks

⁴⁷ *Instrucciones del Obispo Fr. Francisco de Toral a los padres curas y vicarios de Yucatán, 1562*, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 369, 10 folios.

⁴⁸ For a complete description of sixteenth-century beliefs in the devil and his influence on the native American peoples, see Fray Bartolome de las Casas, *In Defense of the Indians: Against the Persecutors and Slanders of the People of the New World*, ed. Stafford Poole, C.M. (De Kalb, IL, 1974). For a modern discussion of this concept of diabolism, see Fernando Cervantes, *The Devil in the New World: The Impact of Diabolism in New Spain* (New Haven, 1994).

⁴⁹ The friars in Yucatán used this term “devil” to describe all aspects of Maya religion, including the continued worship of idols. See *Calepino de Motul*, and its many definitions of *cizin* as “devil.” This term was synonymously used for idol, idolatry, Maya deities, Maya spirits, etc. The universal substitution of the Maya term *cizin* (glossed simply in Spanish to mean “devil”) has caused great confusion for modern scholars who use colonial dictionaries and their terminology in an attempt to understand colonial and pre-colonial Maya religion.

⁵⁰ Cristina Alvarez, *Diccionario etnolingüístico del idioma maya yucateco colonial*, Vol. III (Mexico, 1997), 592-593.

them at little cost. . . .”⁵¹ This concept of native religion as a form of diabolism, with native people seen as engaging in satanic conspiracies, has been dealt with to some degree by recent scholars such as Fernando Cervantes.⁵² Thus, to understand the clerical concept of idolatry as a coherent category, one must remember that the clergy viewed Maya idolatry as far more sinister than “a religion similar to Christianity that rests on false premises.”⁵³

To the Maya, on the other hand, what the clergy called idolatry was nothing more than the outward practice of piety to their ancient gods and the supernatural forces that moved the world. While Christian cosmology sharply divided good from evil and God from the Devil, the pre-Hispanic Mayan world-view was very different. Mayan gods could be both benevolent and malevolent. The very nature of the gods, their almost human propensity for changing their minds and the violence of their desires, made it imperative for the Maya to “propitiate” them with gifts and sacrifices. These offerings served to sway the minds of the gods, appease their anger, or “bribe” them into granting some benefit, such as rain for the *milpas*, sun for the crops, or health in times of epidemics.

For the Maya, what the clergy called idols were simply images of the gods. But these images of the gods, though important, were not at all necessary for Maya worship. For example, the gods of the winds and the rains could be appeased not just by praying to images of the divinities, but also by merely offering the gifts of copal, food, and blood to the winds and rains, or throwing them into the murky waters of any nearby *cenote* or other sacred space. But since idols were not the only source of idolatry, the colonial clergy gradually expanded the traditional concept of idolatry that had been passed down from the earliest days of Christianity. Not wishing to see any of the Mayas’ customs or religious rites preserved, clerics broadened the definition of what was idolatrous in order to include all aspects of native Maya culture that ran contrary to Christian Spanish society. The idolatry trials in the *Relaciones de Méritos* clearly show how this evolving concept of idolatry came to include all types of superstitions and other ceremonies not overtly involving images or *idolos*.

⁵¹ Fr. Diego López de Cogolludo (1613-ca. 1665), *Historia de Yucatán* [Campeche, 1996], Tomo I, 348.

⁵² Again, see Fernando Cervantes, *The Devil in the New World: The Impact of Diabolism in New Spain*.

⁵³ Serge Gruzinski and Carmen Bernand trace the origins and development of the concept of idolatry. See Gruzinski and Bernand, *De la Idolatria*, op. cit.

Relaciones de Méritos and *Yucatec Maya Idolatry*

Only by examining the corpus of idolatry trials contained within the *Relaciones* can one follow the conceptual category of idolatry as it evolved in colonial Yucatan. Since the Maya themselves actually created these historical narratives through their oral answers to questioning, these documents can serve in some degree as a Maya view of the events described. In many cases when the clergy caught them openly worshipping clay, stone and wooden images of their deities, the Maya proved willing to discuss the nature and aspects of their gods with the inquisitive ecclesiastical judges, sometimes in great detail. These interrogations and confessions often provide valuable insights into the nature of colonial Maya religion.⁵⁴ The *Relación de Méritos y Servicios* of Padre Baltazar de Herrera includes one idolatry trial that gives us valuable insights about the nature of colonial Maya religion as well as about the concept of idolatry employed by the clergy in colonial Yucatán. For the sake of space, the following discussion will focus on this one case and then make comparisons with the larger body of evidence.

The Case of Francisco Pech (1598)

In March 1598, in the village of Calotmul, a local Maya *principal*, Francisco Pech, was accused as an idolater, a Maya *ah kin* (or priest), and a dogmatizer (active propagator of idolatrous practices).⁵⁵ Baltazar

⁵⁴ Some of the richest testimony concerning the nature of Maya deities and colonial Maya religious practices is found in the transcripts and trials of the extirpators. For only a few references to the innumerable number of extant documents see the proceedings contained in the *Relaciones de Méritos y Servicios* found in the following places: AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, legajos 105, 130, 136, 138-160, 282, 284, 286, 288, 292, 294, 296, 299, 300, 301, 302, 303, 304, 305, 306, 323-330, 358-370, 1028-1032, 3048, 3167, 3168; AGI, Indiferente General, 192-205, 300, 423; AGI, Patronato, Legajo 231, 232; AGI, Escribanía de Cámara, 308a, 316a, 317, 323a-325; AHN, Inquisición, Legajo 1736-1738; AGN, Ramo de Inquisición, Vol. 35, Vol. 90, Vol. 213, Exp. 10, Vol. 290, Exp. 2, Vol. 302, Exp. 11, Vol. 382, Exp. 1, Vol. 455, Exp. 32, Vol. 467, Exp. 97, Vol. 472, Exp. 5, Vol. 516, Exp. 12, Vol. 535, Exp. 6, Vol. 621, Exp. 1, Vol. 629, Exp. 4, Vol. 639, Exp. 7, Vol. 731, Exp. 17, Vol. 789, Exp. 31, Vol. 908, Exp. 14, Vol. 1046, Exp. 4, Vol. 1164, Vol. 1177, Exp. 7, Vol. 1209, Exp. 6; AGN, Civil, Vol. 1454, Exp. 6; AGN, Bienes Nacionales, Vol. 24, Exp. 16, Vol. 35, Exp. 55; AHAY, Concurso a Curatos, Box 1, Exp. 1-6, Box 3, Exp. 11, Box 4, Exp. 12-15, Box 5, Exp. 16, Box 6, Exp. 17, Box 8, Exp. 27, Box 13, Exp. 48-51; AHAY, Asuntos Terminados, Box 1, Exp. 18, Box 4, Exp. 86, Box 6, Exp. 125, Box 6, Exp. 134, AGEY, Colonial-Varios, Vol. 1, Exp. 18, Vol. 1, Exp. 25; Tulane Latin American Library, VEMC, Leg. 66, Exp. 37.

⁵⁵ For a detailed description of a larger number of cases concerning the continued existence of Maya Priests (*Ah Kinob*) see John F. Chuchiak, "Pre-Conquest *Ah Kinob* in

de Herrera elicited detailed testimony concerning the ceremonies and rituals involved. The documentation that he appended to his *Relación de Méritos* is the source for the historical narrative given here.

According to the testimony provided, Francisco Pech worshipped four major idols, called *Popoltun*, *Dzapahtun*, *Kincoloŋ u Uichkin* and *Ix Ahau Caan*. Pech directed Maya worship of these idols, conducting private banquets and *balché*⁵⁶ rituals in his home and *milpa*. The Maya made altars in honor of these idols, placing the idols themselves on mats made out of leaves or hiding them in the dead trunks of cedar trees.⁵⁷

Two “Christian” Maya members of the local town government were first to discover one of these acts of idolatry. As “good Christians,” they were at odds with Pech’s traditional religion. They quickly challenged Pech, pointing to the idol they had discovered. When confronted about the idol and asked whose idol it was, Pech replied that it was “an idol of the ancient Indians.”⁵⁸ The *alcalde* of the village, Francisco Che, pressed him further on the matter, asking, “Well, how is it that it has fresh coals and all of the signs of a recent offering and sacrifice?” When Pech did not answer, Che reportedly asked him, “If you knew that it was there, why didn’t you destroy it instead of offering to it?”⁵⁹ Pech, growing angry with the two officials who were his accusers, responded by saying, “By what right do I throw him out of his house that he has had in his possession for so long?”

Subsequent testimony and confessions revealed that during sacrifices and rituals in their honor, Francisco Pech gave offerings of food and

a Colonial World: The Extirpation of Idolatry and the Survival of the Maya Priesthood in Colonial Yucatán, 1563-1697,” in *Maya Survivalism*. Acta Mesoamericana Vol. 12, ed. Ueli Hostettler and Matthew Restall (Markt Schwaben, Germany, 2001), 135-160.

⁵⁶ *Balché* was the native Maya intoxicant made from fermented honey and the addition of mildly hallucinogenic bark from the balché tree. For several descriptions of *Balché* and its ritual uses, see John F. Chuchiak, “It is their Drinking that Hinders Them: *Balché*, and the Use of Ritual Intoxicants among the Colonial Yucatec Maya, 1550-1780,” paper presented in the panel entitled, “Working in Spirit Worlds: Ritual Inebriation in Colonial Latin America,” *American Society for Ethnohistory Annual Meeting*, Tucson, Arizona, October 20, 2001.

⁵⁷ *Testimonio de Melchor Xiu, gobernador del pueblo de Calotmul en la ynformación de ydolatría contra Francisco Pech*, 14 de marzo, 1598, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 292, 4 folios. The cedar tree, called *ku che* [holy wood, holy tree] in Maya, was intimately associated with Maya religion and ritual. For more information, see *Ynformaciones de ydolatrias hechas por el vicario del partido de Peto*, 1598, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 292, 56 folios.

⁵⁸ *Testimonio de Francisco Che, alcalde del pueblo de Calotmul en la ynformación de ydolatría contra Francisco Pech*, 16 de marzo, 1598, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 292, 4 folios.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 292, folio 2; also see *Testimonio de Juan Ku, alcalde de Calotmul en la ynformación de ydolatrias contra Francisco Pech*, 18 de marzo, 1598, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 292, 2 folios.

drink to idols that had been placed on small altars.⁶⁰ Detailed testimony written in Maya and Spanish described the intricate details of the ceremonies and the ritual foods offered.⁶¹ The testimonies even preserved various incantations, declaring that after offering the food, Pech drank the ritual intoxicant *balché* and proclaimed in a chant:

... This sacrifice that we offer is for Our Lords *K'in Popoltun* and *K'in Dzapahtun* who are our protectors and who are those who give us life and bring the rains and sustenance and also we offer to those who meet our necessities, *K'incolop u Uichkin* and the other gods such as *Ix Ahaucan*.⁶²

In another ceremony petitioning his gods for rain, Francisco Pech is said to have prostrated himself before the clay idol of the god *Chac Ahau* and censed it with copal. Offering each of the idols a drink of *cacao pozol* he proclaimed in Maya:

... My Lords we offer you this sacrifice ... and I prostrate myself and place myself underneath your hands, underneath your feet. ... Send us rain and provide for us all that is necessary. ...⁶³

⁶⁰ The archives attest to the continued existence of these "private oratories" and altars for idols in the houses and cornfields of the *caciques* and *principales* during the colonial period. For a few examples, see *Testimonio contra Cristobal May, Pablo Chable y Mateo Mocol, principales del pueblo de Yobain por ydolstras*, 1606, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 3048, folio 215; also see *Sumaria información contra don Gaspar Chan, cacique del pueblo de Chunhuhub, por ydolatra*, 1596, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 294; similarly also see *Denuncia contra Francisco Pech, indio principal del pueblo de Peto, por idolatra Ah K'in*, 1598, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 292. The list is endless. Also, there is overwhelming archaeological evidence for the existence of these private "altars and oratories" in the houses of the elites in the post-classic Maya city of Mayapan. See Karl Ruppert and A.L. Smith, "Excavations in House Mounds at Mayapan," in *Current Reports of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, Department of Archaeology*, Vol. I, Numbers 1-14 (1952-1954), 45-67; also see J.E. Thompson, "A Presumed Residence of the Nobility at Mayapan," in *Current Reports of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, Department of Archaeology*, Vol. II, Numbers 14-41 (1954-1957), 71-89. Archaeologists discovered many of these idols or "incensarios" in-situ upon small altars or platforms within what have been termed "nobles' residences."

⁶¹ In the Francisco Pech case, along with translated testimony and confessions transcribed in Spanish, several of the accused Maya idolaters wrote letters and testimony in Maya. For one example, see *Carta en Maya de los Reos ydolstras en el proceso contra ydolatria hecha por el Vicario de Peto*, 11 de Junio, 1598, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 292, 2 folios. In this Maya language petition, the Maya did not deny the charges against them, but merely argued that they had no idea that the worship of their old gods was a crime.

⁶² This incantation was attributed to Francisco Pech and reportedly occurred while he conducted these rituals. For the complete testimony, see *Confesión de Juan Tun, reo ydolatra, preso en el pueblo de Peto por ydolatria*, 7 de julio, 1598, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 292, 4 folios.

⁶³ *Confesión de Juan Na, reo ydolatra en el proceso contra ydolatria hecha por el Vicario de Peto, Baltazar de Herrera*, 10 de julio, 1598, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 292, 3 folios.

As was typical of sixteenth-century Maya traditionalists, Francisco Pech was also an active enemy of the Christian religion. According to testimony and confessions, Pech preached against the worshipping of Catholic saints and attacked Maya converts known to be “good Christians.” Pech’s attacks on Christians and Christianity exemplified the confrontational nature of the Christian-Maya conflicts in colonial Yucatán. On one occasion, Pech entered the house of Juan Na, a prominent Maya from the *cah* of Calotmul, and he was horrified to see a small image of Saint John the Baptist. Francisco Pech exclaimed upon his entry into the house, “Brother, it gives me great fear to enter into your house!” When Juan Na asked him what he feared, Pech pointed to the image of Saint John and replied, “You have that image here which gives me great fear . . . know that you are damned by our gods for having it here, because it does not belong to us but rather it belongs to the Spaniards. . . .”⁶⁴ Under Pech’s orders, Juan Na removed the image of Saint John from his house and took it to the village Church.

This case illustrates how fascinating ethnographic material can be gained from reading these documents. The historical narratives contained within these testimonies served as juridical proof of acts of idolatry—and thus as important documents to be included in the judge’s *Relación de Méritos*. The documents show the petitioning priest using the proper procedures in prosecuting the case, and valid, ratified testimonies to accuse and sentence the suspected idolaters. In conjunction with the confessions of the accused idolaters, the testimony also contains details concerning Maya deities, ritual offerings and ceremonies that the Maya continued to engage in after their conversion to Christianity. The historical narrative contained within these documents thus gives us a glimpse of the conflict between religions in colonial Yucatán.

The story of Francisco Pech, a three-time offender for the crime of idolatry, is a case study not only for the extirpation of idolatry, but also for the tenacity of Maya resistance. Following his appearance before the ecclesiastical judges of the *Provisorato de Indios* in 1598, Pech was sentenced to three years of hard labor. But rather than giving up his old religion, he went on to lead other Maya in ceremonies and rituals of the traditional idol cult. He also never served his sentenced. During his transportation to the capital of Mérida, Pech escaped into the jungle, and disappears from the historical record.

⁶⁴ *Confesión de Juan Na, reo ydolatra en el proceso contra ydolatria hecha por el Vicario de Peto, Baltazar de Herrera*, 10 de julio, 1598, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 292, folio 3.

Relaciones de Méritos *and the Changing Definitions of Idolatry in Colonial Yucatán*

The Pech case (1598) exemplifies the common sixteenth-century definition of idolatry. Francisco Pech and his accomplices actually did worship stone and clay images of their pre-Hispanic deities. This act of idolatry actually did involve *idol-latria*, or the worship of graven images. By the middle of the seventeenth century, however, although idol worship continued, the Catholic clergy in colonial Yucatan were casting their nets more widely, redefining idolatry by including practices that were little more than superstitions or vain observances. At the same time, the higher clergy of the diocese began to sub-delegate the power to punish “idolatry” to local parish clergy. In effect, the higher clergy no longer wished to pay for expensive commissary judges who were often commissioned to investigate idolatry during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. This sub-delegation of power to the lesser clergy is also evident in the documentation contained within the *Relaciones de Méritos*.

The great campaigns against idolatry launched by the colonial Catholic clergy in Yucatán can be subdivided into three distinct historical periods.⁶⁵ The first is best described as the period of the iconoclast bishops, starting with Bishop Diego de Landa [1572-1579], a Franciscan friar, and ending with the tenure of Bishop Gonzalo de Salazar [1610-1636]. These bishops launched personal crusades against idolatry, focusing mainly on the extirpation of open image worship. At the same time, the episcopal courts of the *Provisorato de Indios*, which oversaw the punishment of Maya idolatry, were institutionalized during this first period.⁶⁶ During this period too, the Franciscan friars were edged aside by the secular clergy: bishops now tended to be secular priests, and secular priests came to dominate the campaigns against idolatry. A feeling of optimism reigned, as the clergy believed they could, by their own efforts, root out all remaining pre-Hispanic religious practices in their bishopric.

A second period [1636-1714] began just before the arrival of Bishop Juan Alonso Ocon [1640-1643] and ended with Bishop Pedro de los

⁶⁵ For more complete descriptions and narrative accounts of many of these “campaigns of extirpation” in colonial Yucatán, see John F. Chuchiak, “La extirpación de las idolatrías y relaciones inter-étnicas: conflictos Mayas-Cristianos en una frontera colonial, 1584-1599,” published in the *Memorias del Primer Congreso Internacional de Cultura Maya: Balances y Perspectivas de los Estudios Mayistas en la Península de Yucatán*, ed. Ruth Gubler and Alfonso Barrera Vasquez (Mérida, Yucatán, 2001). Also see Chuchiak, “The Indian Inquisition and the Extirpation of Idolatry.”

⁶⁶ Chuchiak, “The Indian Inquisition and the Extirpation of Idolatry,” 80-128.

Reyes [1700-1714]. This period may be called the "Era of the Zealous Juez Provisor." While the definition of idolatry was being expanded, as noted above, a succession of zealous men occupied the position of *Juez Provisor* (chief judge of the episcopal court known as the *Provisorato de Indios*) and led the campaigns against Maya idolatry. The increasing complexity of the administration of diocesan affairs, often involving disputes with civil authorities, forced the bishops to entrust the provincial campaigns against idolatry to their sub-delegated *Provisores*. Although crimes of idolatry still weighed heavily on the minds of the bishops, they could not afford to devote time, money, and resources to their own personal campaigns of extirpation. Despite the fact that "idolatry" now included an increasing number of practices, rituals, and other superstitions that did not necessarily focus on the worship of graven images, the clergy still felt that they could successfully root out idolatry and make the Maya true "Christians."

The third era [1716-1827], which may be called the "Era of Clerical Disillusionment," began with the bishopric of Dr. Juan Gomez de Parada [1716-1728] and continued to the end of the colonial period, with the bishopric of Dr. Pedro Agustin Estevez y Ugarte [1802-1827]. During this century or so, the bishops and clergy apparently lost all hope of "converting" the Maya. They no longer held millenarian ideas of a "Christian" province populated by the Maya faithful. The priests' letters and conversations concerning the Indians expressed a sentiment of hopelessness against a rising tide of traditional Maya religious practices, all of which came to be categorized as "idolatry."

The famous 1722 Diocesan Synod conducted by Bishop Juan Gomez de Parada codified this negative clerical view of the Indian.⁶⁷ Feeling that the Indians were "hopelessly lost in their idolatries," churchmen determined to focus more of their efforts on the punishment of *mestizo*, *mulatto*, and Spanish idolaters, who were beginning to participate in Maya religious rituals. By the eighteenth century, Maya contact with the Spaniards and mixed castes had led to the evolution of a syncretic religion involving the participation of people of mixed castes in the religious rituals of the Maya. Clerical attitude towards the Maya grew steadily more negative, until the Constitution of Cadiz in 1812 which freed the Indians from tribute and from many of their ecclesiastical obligations. From this point on, the clergy's view of the Maya was

⁶⁷ See *Documentos del synodo diocesano del obispado de Yucatán*, 6 de agosto, 1722, AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, 1040, 400 folios; folio 166-167.

frankly hostile. This final era was characterized by absentee parish priests who delegated their responsibilities to *vicarios*. Similarly, the responsibility for the extirpation of idolatry was further sub-delegated to local assistants of the parish priests, the *tenientes de cura* and *curas coadjutores*.⁶⁸ These lower level officials, who had the most contact with the Maya, resembled the zealous *vicarios* of the sixteenth century, launching small-scale local campaigns against idolatry without benefit of specific commissions. To them, *idolatria* came to serve as a catchword for all types of traditional Maya practices, even some not openly considered religious, such as public drunkenness.

This periodization of the development and process of extirpation of idolatry in colonial Yucatan is supported by an examination of the primary documentation, especially the trials contained in the *Relaciones de Méritos*. Changes in official ecclesiastical policies and in the structure of the ecclesiastical courts were neither abrupt, nor pre-meditated. Instead, the meaning of idolatry changed because of the changing nature of the colonial clergy and the increasing difficulties and tensions between the civil government and the Church. As the documentary evidence suggests, continued traditional Maya religious practices were a constant reality all through the colonial era. What changed were the ways in which the Church dealt with the phenomenon.

A brief review of a number of idolatry cases included in the *Relaciones* will show how the concept of idolatry expanded over time to include lesser practices and rituals that did not involve actual idols or images (*idolos*). A comparison of the cases and types of idolatry punished shows how the goals of the Yucatecan clergy changed over time, and how these changes affected the continuing re-definition of the concept of idolatry.

The earliest cases available from the later part of the sixteenth century reveal that all of the idolatry trials of this period focused on the punishment of Maya who openly worshipped graven images of their traditional deities. A selected list of some of the major cases of idolatry contained in sixteenth-century *Relaciones de Méritos* is found in Chart 1.

⁶⁸ Terry Rugeley examines the expanding role of these *Tenientes de Curas* during the early nineteenth century, and he too describes their growing focus on "extirpating idolatries." See Rugeley, *Yucatán's Maya Peasantry & the Origins of the Caste War* (Austin, TX, 1996).

Chart 1: Numbers of Idolatry Trials found in Selected *Relaciones de Méritos (RDM)* and the Typology of Crimes Punished During the Sixteenth Century

DATE	NUMBERS OF <i>RELACIONES DE MÉRITOS (RDM)</i> FOR YUCATECAN CLERGY	NUMBERS OF <i>RDM</i> WITH APPENDED IDOLATRY TRIALS	TYPES OF CRIMES DEFINED AS “IDOLATROUS” IN <i>RDM</i> IDOLATRY TRIALS	RANK OR POSITION OF CLERGYMAN EXTIRPATING OF IDOLATRY
1570-1580	17	13	Idol Worship = 27 Cases	Parish Priest/ <i>Vicario</i>
1580-1590	15	12	Idol Worship = 40 Cases	Parish Priest/ <i>Vicario</i>
1590-1600	19	14	Idol Worship = 57 Cases	Parish Priest/ <i>Vicario</i>
TOTALS	51	39	124 IDOLATRY CASES	

Out of a total number of 51 *Relaciones de Méritos*, 39 have appended trials or transcripts of idolatry trials associated with them.⁶⁹ Documentation for these trials refers to 124 separate idolatry cases. All of these cases—100%—involved trials against Maya apprehended for worshipping stone, clay, or wooden images of their traditional deities. In sixteenth-century Yucatán, the clergy evidently defined idolatry as the worship of graven images, period. Although other rituals are evident in the trial records, Maya suspects were apprehended and tried only for accusations of image worship.

During the first half of the seventeenth-century, however, the concept of idolatry in colonial Yucatán evolved, and began to incorporate other religious practices besides the open worship of images of the traditional gods (see Chart 2).

As we can see from Chart 2, by the middle of the seventeenth century, the term “idolatry” in colonial Yucatán referred to a wide variety of ritualized practices. To be specific, the chart shows that out of

⁶⁹ The majority of these sixteenth-century *Relaciones de Méritos* are found in the Archivo General de las Indias in Seville, Spain. The specific *Relaciones* that contain idolatry trial information used here can be found in AGI, Audiencia de Mexico, legajos 105, 130, 136, 138-160, 282, 284, 286, 288, 292, 294, 296, 299, 300. Although information concerning sixteenth-century idolatry trials can be found in other archives and in different types of documentation, the sample used here focuses mainly on trials connected with the *Relaciones de Méritos*. Similarly, although this sample does not contain a complete listing of all sixteenth-century *Relaciones de Méritos* available for Yucatán, nevertheless, a majority of those extant are found in the Archivo General de las Indias.

Chart 2: Numbers of Idolatry Trials found in Selected Relaciones de Méritos (RDM) and the Typology of Crimes Punished During the Seventeenth Century

DATE	NUMBERS OF RDM FOR YUCATECAN CLERGY	NUMBERS OF RDM WITH APPENDED IDOLATRY TRIALS	TYPES OF CRIMES DEFINED AS "IDOLATROUS" IN RDM IDOLATRY TRIALS	RANK OR POSITION OF CLERGYMAN EXTERIPATING IDOLATRY
1600-1610	18	14	Idol Worship = 23 Balché Drinking = 2	Parish Priest/ <i>Vicario</i>
1611-1620	10	9	Idol Worship = 24	Parish Priest/ Commissary Judge
1621-1630	7	6	Idol Worship = 16	Commissary Judges
1631-1640	12	11	Idol Worship = 22 Balché Drinking = 12 Superstitious Rituals = 3	Commissary Judges
1640-1644	11	8	Idol Worship = 11 Balché Drinking = 6 Superstitious Rituals = 5 Bloodletting = 2	Commissary Judges
1645-1655	12	10	Idol Worship = 9 Balché Drinking = 12 Superstitious Rituals = 7 Bloodletting = 5	Commissary Judges/ <i>Vicarios</i>
1656-1676	17	15	Idol Worship = 12 Balché Drinking = 16 Superstitious Rituals = 15 Bloodletting = 8	Commissary Judges/ <i>Vicarios</i>
1677-1687	11	8	Idol Worship = 7 Balché Drinking = 10 Superstitious Rituals = 17 Bloodletting = 5	Commissary Judges/ <i>Vicarios</i>
1688-1699	8	6	Idol Worship = 4 Balché Drinking = 8 Superstitious Rituals = 4 Bloodletting = 2	Commissary Judges/ <i>Vicarios</i>
TOTALS	104	83	264 IDOLATRY CASES	

a total of 264 idolatry cases prosecuted, 139 cases, or roughly 53%, consisted of practices and rituals that did not involve the worship of idols or images. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the expanded definition of idolatry included such crimes as the ritual ingestion of the Maya intoxicant *Balché* (66 cases), the practice of ritual bloodletting (22 cases), and various other rituals considered superstitious (51 cases). Thus, while some scholars have argued that the concept of idolatry came to be more narrowly defined over time, in colonial Yucatán what the clergy considered as “idolatry” became more inclusive, even as the ecclesiastical hierarchy began to sub-delegate the power to punish idolaters to their lesser clergy. The end result involved the inclusion of a large number of merely superstitious native practices under the scope of a broadly defined ecclesiastical offense called *idolatria*.

As Sabine MacCormack has argued for Peru, and as is evident from the body of evidence presented here, the concept and definition of idolatry changed according to the necessities of the clergy employing the term.⁷⁰ Richard Warner also argues (in this issue) that the concept of idolatry in the Cora missions in Nayarit changed as clerical and civil priorities changed. Warner argues that in the case of Nayarit, the missionaries’ definitions of *idolatria* changed so much by the later eighteenth century that the term meant little more than a type of rebellious outburst, or any other type of traditional Cora practices that threatened mission life (i.e. ritual public drunkenness or *mitotes*, outspoken resistance to the clergy, etc.). In the case of colonial Yucatán, staunch Maya resistance to Catholicism during the seventeenth century led the clergy to extend their persecution to all aspects of traditional Maya culture and religious practices. All spiritual and cultural practices related to the metaphysical world were now seen as idolatrous.

An examination of only a few cases found in eighteenth-century *Relaciones de Méritos* served to show how the concept of idolatry expanded still further (see Chart 3).

As the cases in Chart 3 show, at the same time that the lesser clergy took over the task of disciplining the Maya, they also expanded the definition of the term *idolatria* to include all traditional practices. This gave the assistant parish priests wider powers to intervene and punish

⁷⁰ Sabine MacCormack chronicles the complex and changing definitions of idolatry and superstition in several chapters of her excellent book, *Religion in the Andes: Vision and Imagination in Early Colonial Perú*, see especially 18-35, 205-240.

Chart 3: Numbers of Idolatry Trials found in Selected Relaciones de Méritos (RDM) and the Typology of Crimes Punished During the 18th and 19th Century

DATE	NUMBERS OF RDM FOR YUCATECAN CLERGY	NUMBERS OF RDM WITH APPENDED IDOLATRY TRIALS	TYPES OF CRIMES DEFINED AS "IDOLATROUS" IN RDM IDOLATRY TRIALS	RANK OR POSITION OF CLERGYMAN EXTIRPATING IDOLATRY
1700-1720	22	17	Idol Worship = 5 Balché Drinking = 13 Superstitious Rituals = 20 Bloodletting = 9 False Beliefs = 4	Parish Priest/ <i>Teniente de Cura</i>
1721-1730	11	8	Idol Worship = 4 Balché Drinking = 11 Superstitious Rituals = 15 Bloodletting = 5 False Beliefs = 2	Parish Priest/ <i>Teniente de Cura</i>
1731-1750	8	5	Idol Worship = 6 Balché Drinking = 17 Superstitious Rituals = 21 Bloodletting = 3 False Beliefs = 10	Parish Priest/ <i>Teniente de Cura</i>
1751-1760	32	25	Idol Worship = 14 Balché Drinking = 27 Superstitious Rituals = 31 Bloodletting = 5 False Beliefs = 14	Parish Priest/ <i>Teniente de Cura</i>
1761-1770	10	8	Idol Worship = 9 Balché Drinking = 19 Superstitious Rituals = 11 Bloodletting = 1 False Beliefs = 9	<i>Teniente de Cura</i>
1771-1780	16	14	Idol Worship = 4 Balché Drinking = 9 Superstitious Rituals = 9 Bloodletting = 1 False Beliefs = 5	<i>Teniente de Cura</i>

Chart 3 (cont.)

DATE	NUMBERS OF <i>RDM</i> FOR YUCATECAN CLERGY	NUMBERS OF <i>RDM</i> WITH APPENDED IDOLATRY TRIALS	TYPES OF CRIMES DEFINED AS "IDOLATROUS" IN <i>RDM</i> IDOLATRY TRIALS	RANK OR POSITION OF CLERGYMAN EXTIRPATING IDOLATRY
1781-1821	39	27	Idol Worship = 10 Balché Drinking = 30 Superstitious Rituals = 17 Bloodletting = 6 False Beliefs = 23	<i>Teniente de Cura</i>
TOTALS	138	104	399 IDOLATRY CASES	

their parishioners. An examination of the cases in Chart 3 shows that out of 399 idolatry cases referred to in the documentation, 347 cases, or approximately 87%, consisted of crimes or offenses that did not involve the worship of idols or images. By the end of the colonial period, then, at least in the diocese of Yucatán, the term *idolatria* was no longer specifically related to the worship of images. In addition to such offenses as public drunkenness and the continued use of the Maya intoxicant *Balché* (126 cases), the ritual practice of bloodletting (30 cases) and an expanded number of other ritual practices (124 cases), "idolatry" now included the new concept of false beliefs (67 cases), meaning a false or confused understanding of Christian beliefs on the part of the Maya.

Conclusion: Toward a Regional Definition of Idolatry in Colonial Yucatán

The *Relaciones de Méritos* provide a window into the evolution of the concept of idolatry in Yucatán during a three hundred year period. Even if they are not accepted as accurate accounts of Maya religion, as I believe they should be, these documents clearly show a changing attitude toward what constituted idolatry on the part of the Catholic clergy. Over the course of the sixteenth century and culminating in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, idolatry came to encompass a wider range of Maya religious practices than has been traditionally accepted since the time of the Scholastics. Practices that modern scholars might not consider idolatrous were seen as such by Spanish clerics in seventeenth-century Yucatán. Some modern scholars, disregarding the practical response of clerics to the resilience and persistence of Maya religion, have attributed this change to theological trends. But in colonial Yucatán, the more

inclusive definition of idolatry in the later period reflected growing ecclesiastical concerns over the religious practices of their native converts.

An analysis of the cases found within the trials of the *Relaciones* makes a strong case for placing the concept of idolatry within an evolving regional context. Examining how the term was used over a long period of time, in a single region of the vast Spanish Empire in the Americas, demonstrates how we can define cultural and religious concepts as complex as idolatry. As an evolving concept, idolatry in colonial Yucatán came to encompass whatever the local Catholic clergy saw as expedient in achieving their self-proclaimed goal of complete conversion of the Maya. This may well resolve the issues raised by David Tavárez (in this issue) about the use of the term idolatry by historians. Tavárez points out that the clergymen in colonial Oaxaca used the term in different and often contradictory ways.⁷¹ He further observes that idolatry, as a term, was neither applied uniformly nor viewed equally throughout colonial Latin America. This essay demonstrates that the term is only problematic if it is taken out of the regional and historical context. Idolatry, in other words, acquired specific regional meanings adapted to the unique religious and cultural circumstances of the time and place.

Although it is difficult to come to a single overarching definition for all of Latin America, not to mention Mexico, over several hundred years, one can achieve a regional understanding of how clerics used the term. The definition of idolatry in colonial Yucatán was neither universal nor static, and cannot be applied to every region of Latin America throughout the colonial period. Although many of the rituals referred to might fall outside of the narrow definition of open worship of graven images, they nevertheless came to be defined as idolatry in the dossiers of the Catholic clergy who served in the diocese of Yucatán. At the same time, the term obviously had quite different connotations for the Maya who persevered in traditional religious practices. But both clergy and Maya understood that idolatry (*idolatria* or *tanlah cizín*) referred at any given point in time to certain types of rituals and practices. In this sense, the term idolatry can be understood as expressing the shared realities of a religiously bifurcated region of the colonial world.

⁷¹ See also, David Tavárez, "De *Cantares zapotecos* a 'libros del demonio': La extirpación de discursos doctrinales híbridos en Villa Alta," *Aceros: Boletín de los Archivos y Bibliotecas de Oaxaca* 17(2000): 19-27; and "La idolatría letrada: Un análisis comparativo de textos clandestinos rituales y devocionales en comunidades nahuas y zapotecas, 1613-1654," *Historia Mexicana* 194, 49/2 (1999): 197-252.