Peripheral Factors in Jesuit-Guaraní Relations and the Dispersion of the Guarani Language

Introduction:

In 1534, The Jesuits, also called the Society of Jesus, received their charter from the Vatican and promptly sent missionaries to the Americas with the goal to evangelize non-Christians. In 1609, they established their first reduction, and between 1609 and 1707, the Jesuits established 30 missions in the Jesuit Province of Paraguay. The Spanish Empire’s primary method of evangelization in the 1600s was to gather native populations into settlements called Reductions, in order to govern, tax, and Christianize them more efficiently. In contrast to the encomienda system generally used in colonial evangelization, the Jesuits proposed a plan for the development of each settlement as an extension of religious work, which consisted of strengthening the evangelical work from social and economic points.

Before being restricted to encomiendas and reductions, the Guaraní were a semi-nomadic people who lived in relatively small multi-family units. In reality there were numerous tribal units with different dialects of Tupi-Guaraní, however the word Tupi-Guaraní has become the superordinate term that includes those indigenous dialects within the same linguistic family. It is generally used in scholarship to refer to the language and the people of the Paraguay region. The Jesuit priests who were sent to Christianize Latin America learned Guaraní in order to speak to the natives. Because Guaraní was a purely oral language, the priests also created a written language for the purpose of printed doctrine by using the Roman alphabet to construct its orthography. In the missions, the Guaraní were taught this “colonial Guaraní” and were able to continue in certain other material aspects of their culture and their existing socio-political structure such as retaining their tribal leaders called caciques.
Within this context, I am interested in the Guaraní-Jesuit interactions in the Guaraní missions of the Río de la Plata, specifically pertaining to the preservation and spread of the Guaraní language during the administration of the Jesuits, the causes of this dispersion, and its consequences. My research acknowledges the work of Bartomeu Melià who submits that the linguistic policy of the mission schools was the primary factor in conservation the Guaraní language, and the research of Robert Jackson, who contributes a wide-ranging comparative study on the various factors of success in the different missions throughout the Río de la Plata. I aim to provide a more comprehensive look into the peripheral aspects of Jesuit-Guaraní relations during the colonial period and their effect on why Guaraní has prominence today. This work also includes a geographical perspective of the missions’ success and a view from the bottom up of the influence of the Guaraní themselves. Using Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony, this endeavor will also consider basic religious similarities between Guaraní theology and Catholicism. It will also examine how these similarities were exploited by both the Jesuits in their evangelization processes and by the Guaraní in their efforts for cultural continuity.

**Significance:**

The Jesuit-Guaraní interactions are important due to their lasting effects on the Guaraní language and the people and society of Paraguay. Paraguay is a land-locked nation, situated between Brazil, Bolivia, and Argentina. During the early colonial period it was part of the Viceroyalty of Peru (established in 1543) and later, after 1776, the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata. Having few population centers except for Asunción, Paraguay was an ideal area to provide the isolation and the large land tracts that were necessary for the evangelization process of the frontier missions. Its two major rivers, the Uruguay and the Paraná, also provided an excellent source of arable land that supported farming trade and cattle raising.
A significant example of the impact of Jesuit-Guaraní relations is the 1992 Constitution of Paraguay gave Guaraní legal status as one of the nation’s official languages, and today, Paraguay is still the only Latin American country to have an indigenous language that maintains the same official status as Spanish. As such, the constitution is bilingual, and school textbooks are typically half in Spanish and half in Guaraní. There are approximately 4.8 million speakers of Guaraní, 4.6 million of them in Paraguay. According to the 2002 census, around 30% of people in Paraguay are monolingual in Guaraní while only 10% are monolingual in Spanish. While some other Latin American nations have large populations of native-language speakers, the position of eminence that Guaraní holds in Paraguay is unique. Yet, scholars have not focused on the effects of the geographical area, the influence of Guaraní society and theology, and the mission economy together to explain this eminence and the hybrid culture of Paraguay. This information can contribute valuable insight into the socio-political policies of Paraguay during its growth into a nation and into the current view of a Paraguayan national identity. It may also present comparative/contrastive data on the success of the Jesuit missions in the Río de la Plata that will add to the larger historiography of the effects of colonial mission programs as a whole.

**Literature Review:**

There are three major trends in the historiography of Jesuit-Guaraní relations with an overall shift from Jesuit to Guaraní focus. The first trend concentrates on the peripheral studies of the missions such as agrarian development, and on the socio-linguistics of Guaraní. This trend mostly overlooks indigenous agency. Nicholas Cushner’s early work about Jesuit ranches focuses on the agrarian development of colonial Argentina, its farms, ranches, and its trade connections, which provides a look into the importance of property management and product distribution to the success of larger Jesuit influence. Germán de Granda’s socio-linguistic work
on the “linguistic reality” of life in Paraguay provides an exhaustive study of the morphology, syntax, phonetics, and historical contexts of Guaraní and Spanish in Paraguay. Though the work focuses mainly on the Spanish and how Guaraní has affected changes in it, de Granda adds to the larger historiography by providing an in-depth linguistic view of bilingualism in Paraguay. While Bartomeu Melià neglects indigenous agency by submitting that the linguistic policy of the Jesuit mission schools is what maintained Guaraní, he expands the historiography by writing specifically about Guaraní from a socio-linguistic perspective and discussing the impact of Jesuit mission society on the preservation of the language. This group of scholars uses documentation kept by the Jesuits such as official letters, account books, and manuscripts, in addition to linguistic documents in Guaraní such as dictionaries, translations, and religious compositions.

The second trend focuses on ethnohistory. This trend marks the shift to a bottom-up view of the Jesuit-Guaraní relations, mission life, and the preservation of the Guaraní language. Erick Langer and Robert Jackson’s work provides the foundation of a comparative discourse on mission programs in the colonial and republican periods and incorporates methods and perspectives new to the literature on the frontier missions of Spanish America. Likewise, David Block maintains the importance of indigenous agency and examines the role of European-Native American encounters in establishing new societies. He also identifies several of the ways in which native people asserted themselves from within the missions. Ernesto Maeder’s work discusses the dissolution of mission Guaraní society after the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767. Bartomeu Melià’s investigates the difference between the “conquered” Guaraní of colonial historiography and the “reduced” Guaraní from Jesuit documentation. He adds to mission literature by being one of the earlier historians to present a critical historiography of the Jesuit reductions and their colonial environment. These scholars use primary sources such as mission
book-keeping records and Jesuit accounts from various National Libraries (Madrid, Rio de Janeiro, Santiago de Chile, and Buenos Aires), as well as building on and critiquing earlier research from the 1950s to 1970s. The focus of these works on the native experience within the missions aims to more thoroughly understand the impact of the missions on indigenous societies.

In the third trend, present-day scholars primarily contribute ethno-histories that more fully engage the indigenous perspective and reexamine Jesuit sources to bring to light Guaraní voices. Works by Julia Sarreal, Barbara Ganson, and Guillermo Wilde all question Jesuit hegemony and give reasons for why many Indians were willing to join the reductions and learn Catholicism. Cynthia Radding’s comparative environmental history creates a general supposition about the connection between environmental and cultural histories, concluding, like Jackson, that the natural environment of the missions provided a fundamental material culture and foundation of identity of the various mission societies. Graciela Chamorro and Nicholas Cushner relate the manner in which one religion may replace another and how the Guaraní theology influenced the conversion tactics used by the Jesuit, the conversion response of the Guaraní, and the mixing of indigenous religion and Guaraní. These scholars use state and local archival data from national libraries in Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, with contemporary reports, previous histories, oral histories and interviews. The concentration of these works on how the Guaraní affected mission society and even the regional theological discourse demonstrate the height of the current trend toward history from indigenous perspectives.

I will add to this literature review by building upon the religious, geographical, and economic peripheral aspects of the Jesuit missions along with a perspective of indigenous agency to examine how these factors played a vital role in the success of missions and the preservation and spread of Guaraní language and culture.
Methodology:

I will use Antonio Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony. In using Gramsci’s theory, this work aims to examine the popular concept of the Jesuits as the preservers of Guaraní and how the Guaraní were allowed to “stay native.” This theory functions by achieving the consent of the masses to accept social norms and the rules of law by constructing the worldview of the ruling class, and the social and economic structures that follow it, as just, legitimate, and designed for the benefit of all. Consent to the rule of the dominant group is carried out through the diffusion of dominant ideologies via social institutions such as education, family, and religion. Because institutions are the medium through which people are socialized into these norms, values, and beliefs of the dominant social group, the class or organization that controls the institutions that maintain social order, then commands all others in society. Cultural hegemony is most strongly manifested when those ruled by the dominant group come to believe that economic and social conditions are natural and inevitable, rather than created by people with a vested interest in a particular social order.

My primary sources include the writings of Jesuit missionaries, censuses, and accounting records in addition to reports about economic and ecclesiastical progress in the missions. I also examine Jesuit accounts from authors such as Antonio Ruiz de Montoya and Jose Cardiel. While these sources only grant a Jesuit perspective, they provide a great deal of information about the missions, particularly about their daily routines, language, and society. My research will analyze the conditions of mission society, historical data, and present-day outcomes to produce my hypothesis that the success of the missions and thereby the preservation of Guaraní language and culture was largely impacted by these seemingly tangential factors.
The completion of this project will be April, 2015, when I will defend its contents in front of an Honors Committee thesis board.
Bibliography

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


