

**San Jerónimo, Patron Saint of Masaya:
A contested politico-religious symbol in
post-Sandinista Nicaragua**

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Introduction

Inspired by the “possibility that rituals are historical events” (Kelly and Kaplan 1990:120), this paper places its ethnographic analysis of a ritual event observed in 1999 in Masaya, Nicaragua within an historical anthropological framework rooted in a Weberian hermeneutics of religion and political legitimation. Patron saint celebrations are a long-running cultural pattern of Catholic religious ritual celebration, a structure through which a community reproduces and recreates itself through continuity, conflict and change. In the ritual event described here, a subordinate local group, through the medium of Catholic ritual, at a particular point in history disputed the authority of an incumbent national political leader, not relinquishing the power opened up due to a revolution even though it is in the throws of a counterrevolution. John D. Kelly and Martha Kaplan (1990:141) argue that ritual is “a principal site of new history being made.” This view of ritual as “history being made” rather than repetition of a timeless tradition informs my analysis of the event.

History and Theory Intertwined to Understand Patron Saint Festivals as “New History Being Made” in Masaya, Nicaragua

The connections between ritual and power have received renewed anthropological attention in the work of David Kertzer (1988) who argues that modern political life is not free of ritual, but rather

Ritual is a ubiquitous part of modern political life. Through ritual aspiring political leaders struggle to assert their right to rule, incumbent power holders seek to bolster their authority, and revolutionaries try to carve out a new basis of political allegiance. All of these political figures, from leaders of insurrections to champions of the status quo, use rites to create political reality for the people around them.

This paper bears out Kertzer’s statement that ritual is a tool for creating political reality; however, national elites do not have a monopoly on its use. Although elites may attempt to manipulate the people below them to accept their hegemony, subalterns on the local level also use the rituals to which they have access to make their role in the process known. This paper offers an ethnographically-based confirmation of human agency at work in a politico-religious ritual event being used to make “new history.”

Whether secular or religious, a ritual tells a story about the “reproduction, contestation, transformation, and - if we accept carnival as ritual - deconstruction of authority” (Kelly and Kaplan 1990:41). Hence, it is an important cultural element of legitimation in human society. Legitimation of political authority is a complex, on-going process that takes ritual form on both local and national levels. Legitimation is an important topic of analysis in the Weberian tradition. Max Weber’s (1993 (1922)) emphasis on the historical analysis of those who produce and carry cultural meanings situates religious

movements as “differentiating factors” in the legitimation process and the ongoing social development of a polity.

A Gramscian (Gramsci 1971) view of religion as a political force recognizes differentiation within Catholicism in spite of its efforts to maintain unity since the Protestant Reformation. This transnational institution “is in reality a multiplicity of distinct and often contradictory religions” (Fulton 1987:203). This paper will compare differentiating segments of a confraternity and suggest a wider set of differentiating factors evident within Catholicism, including liberation theology, charismatics and the neo-catechumens. The ritual event highlighted here shows a cultural pattern in Nicaragua of intertwining secular and religious elements.

Drawing on the work of Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) enhances our understanding of religion as a political force. Gramsci’s (1960:71) writes that: Religion is a need of the spirit. People feel so lost in the vastness of the world, so thrown about by forces they do not understand; and the complex of historical forces, artful and subtle as they are, so escapes the common sense that in the moments that matter only the person who has substituted religion with some other moral force succeeds in saving the self from disaster (quoted in Fulton 1987:202).

For Gramsci, socialism is the moral force that is a superior substitute for religion. Hence, Gramsci’s understanding of the dynamics of power sees socialism and Catholicism as rivals because they are both forms of “total social praxis” (Fulton 1987:202). He promoted the idea, anathema to the Roman Catholic Church, that socialism has a philosophy, spirituality, and morality that will replace Catholicism. Gramsci lived and died before religion emerged as an important component of the revolution in Nicaragua. As Margaret Randall (1983:11) wrote, “Nicaragua is the first country where Christians as a group played a decisive role in all aspects of the political and social conflict up to and including armed struggle.” Revolutionaries drawing on liberation theology tried to heal the rivalry between Christianity and revolution, while the Church hierarchy insisted that the struggle between socialism and Catholicism should still be engaged as a life or death fight. This dynamic struggle continues in the post-revolutionary period.

Talal Asad’s theory and research takes up the challenge of understanding the dynamics of power. In particular, his critique of ritual and religion in anthropology is a very important corrective to the dominant theory exemplified by Clifford Geertz (1973). Asad (1993:32) objects to Geertz’s claim to a transcultural, transhistorical definition because any such effort will necessarily import cultural assumptions that negate the claim to universal applicability. Asad’s examination of Geertz’s definition shows that, although on its face, it appears to be a secular, social scientific definition, it actually has unacknowledged Christian roots. Geertz’s emphasis on “the priority of belief as a state of mind” is central to “modern, privatized” Christianity (Asad 1993:47). Moreover, Asad rejects Geertz’s reduction of religion to the semiotic concept of symbol because Geertz thereby isolates religion from the people and social structures that carry and use symbols in space and time. In an important theoretical correction that hints at the Weberian concept of “ideal interests” (Kalberg 1985), Asad appropriately refocuses anthropological attention on the practices of social actors because symbols are “intrinsic to signifying and

organizing practices” rather than “meaning-carrying objects external to social conditions and states of the self” (Asad 1993:32), as Geertz would have it.

Geertz (1973:90), in his famous definition of religion, says that religion is a cultural system in which symbols “establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations.” Asad counters by saying that symbols, as such, do not implant powerful states of mind or motivate a person’s actions; instead, forms of power attempt to move people to a particular desired state of mind. Asad (1993:35) makes this point by looking at Saint Augustine (Brown 1967; Ryan 1960), a theologian of the early Christian church whose famous autobiographical account of his conversion is a foundational text in the Christian tradition. Augustine recounts his conversion as the result of far more than his own individual efforts at contemplating the Word of God in the sacred texts. Asad (1993:35) writes:

Augustine was quite clear that power, the effect of an entire network of motivated practices, assumes a religious form because of the end to which it is directed, for human events are the instruments of God. It was not the mind that moved spontaneously to religious truth, but power that created the conditions for experiencing that truth.

The subject of this paper - the patron saint festival observed in Masaya, Nicaragua at the end of the twentieth century - is the result of a historically deep set of “motivated practices” through which native Mesoamericans were made into Christians. Patron saint festivals celebrated by municipalities throughout Latin America emerged from the Catholicism imposed on native communities by the Spanish Conquest (Kinloch Tijerino 1995). The conquest of Nicaragua began with forcible conversions in 1523. Gil González Dávila conquered the territory, forced Indians to accept baptism through violence and threats of violence. Later, he wrote to his archbishop claiming that they accepted baptism voluntarily (Arellano 1986:15).

Jorge Klor de Alva’s (1988) research shows that Mesoamerican Indians were not as quickly and easily converted as the conquistadors claimed. The cross and the sword were joined in the conquest, but native Americans resisted, using the new cultural tools introduced by the Spaniards in combination with Mesoamerican ones to resist, fight back, adapt and survive. The “power that created the conditions for experiencing” the Catholic religion as truth did not dominate Mesoamerican Indians completely.

While recognizing the powerful coercive force of the Catholic centralist tradition imposed on Latin America by the bureaucratic state of the Catholic Crown of Isabella and Ferdinand (Véliz 1980), scholars have dug out the evidence that the conquering forces did not replace Mesoamerican cultures wholesale. This long-standing pattern of resistance has been documented in Nicaraguan history (Gould 1993; Gould 1997; Gould 1998; Membreño Idiáquez 1992; Rizo Zeledón 1999; Wheelock Román 1976). Anthropological tools are important for identifying how “local-level processes actively shape the larger picture” (Smith 1993:76). The conquistadors confronted peoples with the human capacity to make and use culture. Louise Burkhart (1989:6) writes that Mesoamerican Indians “faced the greatest challenge ever presented” to them when confronting the Spanish conquest; they had to figure out “how to make sense of an invasion by alien beings intent not only on seizing their wealth and territory but on altering their most deeply held religious beliefs.”

Franciscan missionaries, the first to arrive in Nicaragua as in the rest of New Spain, provided a softening of the onslaught, after the initial brutality of the conquistadors. They sought to understand native cultures and languages, albeit for the purpose of conversion rather than respect for different ways of life and thinking. While they realized that translation of Christian ideas was a necessary basis for fostering conversions, they did not fully understand that translation would transform the concepts they sought to impose as universal and immutable.

Recent studies reveal that culture contact under conditions of oppression produced no simple blending of cultures, thus calling older notions of syncretism (Madsen 1957; Uchmany 1980) into question. Burkhart's (1989:7) careful textual analysis demonstrates that the religion developed in the New World was a new one, not a balanced "middle ground" between the European and pre-Hispanic elements. A comparison of differing cultural interpretations of salvation will illustrate a difference especially pertinent to patron saint festivals. Individual salvation did not make sense in Mesoamerican terms, but salvation or survival of the community did. Therefore, when Indians adopted the institution of the *cofradía* (confraternity or sodality) to celebrate Catholic saints, they adapted it "to maintain a community identity, focused on the local saint, that promoted social cohesion in the face of Spanish racism and exploitation" (Burkhart 1989:190). Thus, the *cofradía* was institutionalized on the local level in Indian communities before the "heavy hand of the Counter-Reformation pulled the priests away from their immersion in native language and culture" (Burkhart 1989:5).

Thus, even within a history of religious truth imposed by powerful forces, subalterns galvanize the resources at their disposal to struggle with higher authorities. Moreover, the Spanish combination of political and religious powers was not a surprising combination for Mesoamerican Indians. Pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican social organizations reveal a "close collaboration between those responsible for art, religion and politics" that established "a cohesive set of symbols of power" (Schavelzon and Zatz 1980; cited in Schobinger 1992:41, n.10). To hark back to Asad's analysis, structures of power for creating conditions that make religious truth convincing existed in Pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, giving native peoples prior cultural experience with the interweaving of religion and politics. Then, having to deal with the Spaniards added another 500 years of experience with religion as politics.

Nicaraguan Indian villages on the Pacific coast such as Monimbó, now an indigenous barrio of the city of Masaya, have many confraternities. Through colonial times and into the modern era, these organizations have been subject to efforts to control them undertaken by both Church and State. Under these pressures, their legal and economic underpinnings as well as internal structures have changed.

A few brief examples will suffice. Ligia María Peña Torres (2002) examines the historical record for Nicaragua from 1750-1810, noting the various legal cases that show efforts to control *cofradías* and indigenous resistance to such control. During colonial times, Catholic clergy and Spanish authorities criticized Indian *cofradías* for celebrating the saints' days in their own special ways. Serge Gruzinski (1990) found historical evidence in the colonial period that festive drinking and eating to celebrate a saint's day was considered an exhibition of gluttony, a sin that perverted the Christian message they were

trying to instill in their new subjects. Gruzinski presents evidence that ritual and collective consumption of food, especially in connection with dancing, have roots in Mesoamerican religious practice. Continuing these practices with the Catholic saint celebrations, food and drink served to create links between saints and community, a particularly Indian way of being together that set them apart from non-Indians even more than the segregating rules of the confraternities (Gruzinski 1990:214). Once organized into a *cofradía* to pay homage to a particular saint, Mesoamerican Indians formed strong attachments to the images, especially after supplication resulted in cures and miracles. Since the sacred images were not mere physical objects in native eyes, they resisted the church taking the images away. Such attachments were affective rather than ideological. Gruzinski (1990:218) describes the Indian understanding of sacred objects as "multiple and recurrent 'instruments of evocation'" rather than symbols of something that stood behind the image itself. The image was a "support" through which the "Indians invented, built and ordered their reality from the 17th century onwards" (Gruzinski 1990:218).

Just as Geertz's concept of symbol is inadequate for understanding the cult of saints, the notion of ritual as enacted symbol as conventionally used in anthropology is also a weak tool for understanding ritual as social action. Talal Asad (1993:62) theoretically extends the concept of ritual beyond the semiotic notion of ritual as enacted symbol to recognition of ritual as "apt performance." Clarification of the meanings of ritual action results from understanding the historical context in which the ritual event takes place rather than a narrow focus on a symbol and a faulty assumption of obscure meanings that need decoding.

In the fragile democracy, or perhaps more realistically, the semi-authoritarian state (Flores 2002; Ottaway 2003) that is post-revolutionary Nicaragua, politicians continue to seek legitimation from religion and also they continue to face resistance when they seek such legitimation. In 1978-1979, the indigenous residents of the barrio Monimbó in Masaya, descendents of the Mesoamerican Indian group known as the Chorotegas, (Carmack 1998; Carmack 2002) rose in insurrection against Somoza in a revolution that toppled the 40-year family dictatorship. After ten years of Sandinista rule and another ten years under various forms of the Liberal party, Monimboseños continue to participate in political struggles, expressing their views through religious ritual as members of a religious brotherhood or confraternity (*cofradía*). This group from Monimbó exercises its agency and emerges as a self-identified group, whom anthropologist Les Field (1999) concludes, are artisans rather than proletarians who operate from a Subject position as members of a "rebellious subaltern ethnic community."

With these theoretical tools in hand, let us turn to the ethnographic description of a ritual action that took place in 1999 and see how these historical and theoretical tools help us see in this event another instance of "new history being made."

Masaya's Patron Saint Celebration

Masaya's protector is Saint Jerome,¹ a scholar and saint of the early Christian Church, a contemporary of Augustine. The image of the patron saint is a small statue representing Saint Jerome in his period of penance as a hermit in the wilderness; the statue is semi-nude with bloody knees and a bloody wound in his chest. With a stone in his left hand, the image symbolizes Jerome beating his breast in self-flagellation to expiate his sins. While the chest of the image is never covered, devotees donate hats and clothing to wrap around his lower body. The image sits on top of a massive platform constructed of bamboo and cane tied together lengths of bamboo and cane and covered with leaves and flowers to simulate a mountain where the monk fled to mortify his flesh and pray for his salvation. The platform weighs three tons and requires eighty men (called *peñeros*) to hoist it. In addition to carrying the saint and his mountain, the *peñeros* also occasionally shake the platform, making it "dance." The devotees, who follow the saint in the procession, dance along in the street. The lifting and dancing actions with the patron saint requires considerable physical strength and coordination. Pablo Antonio Cuadra (1997 (1968):120), a much-lionized literary figure and folklorist who edited the literary section of the Chamorro family newspaper, *La Prensa*, called the procession for Saint Jerome a "volcanic dance," referring to Masaya's proximity to a volcano that the Chorotega Indians consider to be a fiery, angry god requiring appeasement.²

Patron saint celebrations are generally regarded as social mechanisms that mobilize large groups of devotees for an activity that aims to create solidarity for the city as a unit by covering those streets in ritual procession (Gudeman 1976:725). Stephen Gudeman (1976:724) notes that patron saint fiestas provide an opportunity for each village, town, or city to distinguish itself

¹ Saint Jerome (~341 AD--~420 AD) was a scholar of the early Catholic Church, born in the small town of Stridonius at the head the Adriatic Sea in the Roman province of Dalamatia.

² Pablo Antonio Cuadra (1997 (1968):119-121) argues that the conversion of the native peoples of Nicaragua to Christianity took place by substituting the symbol of San Jerónimo, a scholar and saint of the early Catholic Church, for the headless God of the volcano feared by the Indians. The exuberance of the folk Catholic tradition of the patron saint street procession preserves the volcanic energy of the indigenous people who continue to be the majority of the devotees of the saint, according to the folklorist approach. Cuadra, who died in 2002 at the age of 89, was a key figure in the Nicaraguan folklore movement (Whisnant 1995). Religious practices including the street processions and the dance were transformed into "folklore" to be collected, studied, and developed to acknowledge and incorporate the indigenous heritage into the dominant national culture. Cuadra was a leading intellectual from an elite family in Granada. He founded and directed some of Nicaragua's most influential literary reviews and championed popular culture as folklore. Cuadra is one of many Nicaraguan elites who promoted the development of a national *mestizo* identity. Scholars and activists alike have been calling into question the myth of *mestizaje*. Jeffrey Gould (1990; 1993; 1995; 1997;1998) is documenting the history of the way the promotion of *mestizaje* romanticizes the Mesoamerican indigenous past, while excluding the contemporary Indian culture on the Pacific Coast. The folklore movement sought to reframe the remnants of the colonial *cofradía* structures into a modern form of social control (Mendoza 2000). Yet, the agency of the indigenous people continues to erupt, using whatever resources they have to find avenues of resistance.

as unique and special through its mode of celebration. Participants agree that to assume a *cargo* for the festival is “a great economic burden” (Diener 1978:103). The *mayordomo* must be responsible for these expenses or assemble a group that will ask for the donations needed (Lanza 2002). Hence, with the weakening of the *cofradía* as an economic institution in colonial times (Peña Torres 2002), the search for ways to fund the festivities has turned more to individual donations, especially from politicians.

My ethnographic observations of Masaya’s patron saint fiesta confirms that it shares the basic cultural pattern of similar Catholic ritual celebrations throughout Latin America and Spain in which the saint protector of the community is carried in street procession. Driessen’s (1984) study of religious brotherhoods describes the historically specific events in which class differences are expressed through conflicts within and through the *cofradías* in rural Andalusia, Spain in the 1930s. Nicaraguan processions also bear strong resemblance to processions in Italian peasant communities and in an early Italian immigrant community in New York City (Orsi 1985).

My focus on an ethnographic example of a patron saint confraternity in the late twentieth century Nicaragua reveals that the confraternity has changed over the centuries, but it is still being used as an instrument to maintain some element of autonomy for the indigenous community, even as dominant forces continue to try to control the rebellious tendencies of the population. Just as priests in the late nineteenth century complained that Indians acted as if they had autonomous control over the *cofradía* (Gould 1994), similar complaints are heard today. Subaltern members of the San Jerónimo patron saint confraternity resist a return to powerlessness, after a revolution gave them a taste of greater recognition within society. The Sandinista Revolution included secular elements including socialist principles based on the Cuban model, but strong currents of religious motivation also fueled the revolution against the Somoza family dictatorship. Yet, the Christian influence is not limited to liberation theology. The traditional street processions continue, even as new movements arise, such as liberation theology on the left and charismatics and the neo-Catechumens on the right.

History of the Selection of San Jerome as Patron Saint

Saint Jerome was chosen as Masaya’s protector in 1839, when the Villa de San Fernando was elevated to the level of a city and given the new name, Masaya. It is noteworthy that this change took place one year after Nicaragua had become an independent republic in 1838, when Nicaragua along with Costa Rica and Honduras seceded from the failing Central American Federation (Walker 1991; Woodward Jr. 1985). I have received conflicting and sketchy explanations of the circumstances of San Jerónimo becoming the patron saint. One of my informants from Monimbó said that the introduction of San Jerónimo was imposed on the Indians and, although a blow to the autonomy of the indigenous community of Monimbó, they eventually adopted the saint and, thus, many of the traditions long associated with the saint are specifically due to cultural creativity of the Monimboseños. This informant is a young man from a poor family who make their living from the artisan work of making palm leaf brooms, but he is also training to become a priest. He told me that, originally, the indigenous community, organized as a *cofradía* to venerate the Virgin of the

Assumption since roughly 1650. They felt an especially strong bond with this image of the Virgin because, they said, she protected them when the volcano near Masaya erupted on March 16, 1772. While the volcano erupted, Monimboseños carried the image of the Virgin to the edge of the Masaya lagoon, seeking divine protection against the lava pouring down on the surrounding communities. A spark from the flowing lava burned a finger and a toe of the image. Then, the eruption stopped. The Indians refused to repair the damage because they believed it was a sign of the Virgin's intercession for them; she had suffered the burn on their behalf, calming the volcano. Another informant, also an artisan who is an avid reader of Nicaraguan history, appeared at a ritual reenactment of the procession to the volcano, with a reference to the scholarship of Nicaraguan historian Jerónimo Pérez (1975), seeking to demonstrate to me the historical accuracy of the event being commemorated.

Carmen Rojas (1993), editor of the folklore journal *Tata Chombo*, writes that the "bourgeois" *mestizo* leaders of Masaya began thinking they would switch the patron saint to the Virgin of the Assumption, although San Jerónimo had been the original choice. The Indians from Monimbó, however, outmaneuvered the elites in 1841 by obtaining a lovely image of San Jerónimo for September 30 and launching a grand patron saint festival. The *alcalde de vara* (indigenous mayor³) sent up firecrackers, lighted candles, and played marimba music launching the longest patron saint festival in Nicaragua. Perhaps tending more towards flattery of the indigenous community than to historical accuracy, this folkloric interpretation strives to project the authentic nature of the Indian contribution to national customs through designating Masaya as the "cradle of folklore" (*cuna del folklóre*) of the nation.

The Recurrent Structure of the Patron Saint Festival

Masaya's patron saint festival lasts for three consecutive months, the longest patron saint celebration in Nicaragua. Three street processions with the image of the saint are centerpieces of this ritual. The patron saint festival begins on September 20⁴ with the first *bajada* (lowering). On that day, the *peñeros* (carriers) take the image down from the altar in the Saint Jerome Church and carry it in the streets to the Church of Our Lady of the Assumption in the center of town. As the festival proceeds, the street processions grow longer in duration and cover more ground, drawing increasingly larger ritual

³ Field (1999:182) argues that the institution of the *alcalde de vara* ("mayor of the cane") is a colonial creation because the King of Spain provided this silver-headed cane as a symbol of the authority, although Flavio Gamboa and other Monimboseños see it as "evidence for the persistence of traditional authority." Joshua Hatton (1998) considers the *alcalde de vara* ("mayor of the staff") a traditional office of authority, even though it dates from the colonial period.

⁴ This day marks the beginning of the patron saint celebration because it was on this day in 1295 that Pope Boniface VIII designated Jerome a doctor of the Church for his scholarly writings and teachings, in particular his translation of the Scriptures into Latin producing the Vulgate version of the Bible.

boundaries around more and more of the community. On September 30⁵, the official feast day for Saint Jerome, the *peañeros* again lower the saint's image from the altar and carry it on a route through the city with many pre-arranged stops throughout the city. Those who provide funds for the event receive the blessing of the saint by having his image stop in front their houses along the route.

The last lowering of the saint's image is the most recent innovation in the patron saint festival. Taking place on the Octave after the official feast day, this street procession lasts all day and night on October 7, covering much of the city, including nearly every street in the barrio of Monimbó. Since colonial times, the octave of a feast has often enjoyed greater importance than the feast day itself (Cahill 2002:635). For Monimboseños, in the late twentieth century, the Octave assumed new importance in their communal life. This patron saint street procession first took place on the day that the Sandinistas marched into Managua, while Somoza fled and the National Guard disintegrated without his leadership. For the first time in history, in the euphoria after the overthrow of Somoza on July 19, 1979, young men from Monimbó lowered San Jerónimo from the altar and carried the image for hours through the indigenous barrio. Later that year, this additional street procession on the Octave was institutionalized.

***New History Being Made:
San Jerónimo, a Patron Saint Festival that is “Politiquero”***

Several informants indicated that San Jerónimo is the most *politiquero* (political intriguer) of any patron saint celebration in Nicaragua. In the modern era, the *peañeros* have been soliciting funds from politicians, the only sources of large sums of money for the expensive festival. The lay president of the Saint Jerome *cofradía* in Masaya says the celebration may cost as much as 40,000 córdobas (roughly US\$ 3300, depending on the exchange rate) requiring a balancing act within the volatile political currents in the community and the nation.

Flavio Gamboa, historian and organic intellectual of Monimbó, has family documents that reveal President José Santos Zelaya at the end of the nineteenth century as the first politician to come to Masaya for the patron saint festivities, rolling out the red carpet of the Liberal Party. Later, after the United States helped to depose Zelaya with Conservative Party assistance, the green colors of that party were evident in the patron saint festivals during their Thirty Years of governing. The first Somoza brought back this political pact forming process, after the United States withdrew its Marines in 1936 (Esgueva Gómez 1999). The patron saint celebration in Masaya, then, has been strongly tied to national political scene and has become a popular place to visit in the effort to win electoral votes from the Catholic faithful participating in the procession. Thus, in spite of formal separation of church and state contained in Nicaraguan constitutions since the turn of the twentieth century, the San Jerónimo patron

⁵ Jerome died on September 30; thus, this is the date set for the saint's festival day in the international Catholic liturgical calendar and is the date for the second *bajada* of the image of the saint in Masaya.

saint festival is just one of many examples in which religion and politics are intertwined. With the resumption of political pacts negotiated between Somoza's Liberal Party and the Conservatives, the *cofradía* received donations from both parties. The street procession would pass the mayor's balcony where Somoza stood with his minions and, then, go down another street to give the saint's benediction to the Conservative Party leader. Thus, the political pact created to follow the formal demands of electoral democracy, while keeping the Somoza family dynasty in power (Esgueva Gómez 1999), ironically, provided a relatively stable environment for the solicitation of funds annually for the patron saint festival.

The Sandinista Revolution broke that form of bipartisan relations. Instead of quotas of power that gave proportional representation to the two dominant political factions, there was no agreement to give each party its place in a stable, if authoritarian, situation (Mackebach 1996). One-party rule and symbolic gestures to wrap the patron saint in the Sandinista colors of red and black shut out opposing political forces, establishing one-sided, partisan support for the patron saint festival.

The institutionalization of the lowering of the patron saint image on the Octave was an "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), made possible by the Sandinista Revolution. This new tradition marked a significant advance for Monimboseños. As the saint's image traveled through the streets, those carrying the saint actively re-drew of the sacred boundaries of the city to include Monimbó and its inhabitants. Succeeding generation of *peañeros* were young men who had served in the Sandinista Army during the contra war, while the country became ideologically polarized. Archbishop and later Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo of Managua led the national Catholic Church in opposition to the Sandinistas. The Catholic Church and its supporters protested inside the country and in external venues (Belli 1983; Belli 1985) objected to the Sandinista attempts to legitimation through religious symbols. The issue of the draft (called "Patriotic Military Service" by the Sandinistas) faced stiff opposition from the Catholic Church.

The generation of the insurrection and that of the time of the draft into the Patriotic Military Service in the Sandinista Army share a similar weak form of the patriarchal family, while having a decidedly different state apparatus and authority structure. During the struggle against Somoza, the *cofradías*, such as this one in Monimbó, may have provided one of the few social structures available to the young men who were the combatants of the revolutionary insurrection. They were mostly not official members (*militantes*) of the Sandinistas guerrilla movement. Monimboseños contributed to the overthrow of Somoza largely through their own spontaneous efforts as a community to defend themselves against Somoza's National Guard. When the uprising took place in Monimbó, the Sandinistas hastened to the community to lead those that were already leading the revolution. Carlos Vilas (1985) found that the "social subject" of the insurrection that overthrew the Somoza dictatorship is not the working class due to Nicaragua's weak agrarian economy⁶. Those who

⁶ The economic structure of Nicaragua includes a great many small businesses, mostly artisan workshops, coexisting with a few large factories (Vilas 1985:121). Nicaragua's economy suffers from a high rate of male unemployment in which many are forced to migrate to find work.

fought against Somoza's National Guard were very young and predominantly male. More than half were illegitimate sons living with single mothers (Vilas 1985:127). Vilas notes the lack of a patriarchal family; they essentially grew up with either distant or no male authority. In addition, Vilas notes the lack of community organizations, which he interpreted to mean that the only contact with male authority might have been the conflictive relationship with the repressive Somocista state (Vilas 1985:129). However, a community organization overlooked by Vilas is the *cofradía*, where young men would aspire to positions such as *peaño*. Alienated from religious worship inside the Church, such as mass, young men are more likely to have participated in the street processions, since the street is the social space utilized by men rather than the home or the church.

As time continued forward, the *peaños* in 1999 were young men between 25 and 30 years of age who had served their "patriotic military service" under the Sandinistas. The army provided an institutional experience that reflects a strong national government rather a repressive state apparatus targeting the young as enemies of the dictatorship. Making gains towards professionalism as a defensive force during the contra war, the Sandinista army would have provided a decidedly different experience of political authority than the oppositional, clandestine struggle against the dictatorship. In the years after the 1990 electoral defeat to Chamorro's coalition, the Sandinistas as political party maintained considerable loyalty among the ranks, giving it greater cohesion as a political party than any other party. Having the experience of military discipline under conditions of a socialist fusion of state-party-military, the young men, who would later become *peaños*, experienced the ideological polarization of the contra war. As internal political opposition grew with the international ideological, military, and economic struggle against the Sandinista government, the Catholic Church emerged as a leader of the internal opposition to the revolution (Crahan 1989; Kirk 1992; Lernoux 1989; Mulligan S. J. 1991).

The revolution and the counterrevolution set in motion a heightened sectarian political approach that opened up the group of *peaños*, who supported the revolution, to political retaliation when the Sandinistas were voted out of office in 1990. When Sebastian Putoy, a Liberal Party candidate from Monimbó assumed the mayor's office in Masaya, he refused to donate money to the patron saint festival because he said it had been politicized.

An Ethnographic Description of a Particular Ritual Event

On September 30, 1999, in Masaya, Nicaragua, the patron saint religious procession of San Jerónimo wound its way through the streets of the city. The *peaños* carrying the image of their patron saint in the street procession, stopped the procession before reaching the mayor's office and an open conflict broke out between the *peaños* and their leaders of the confraternity. It was hard to see what was happening from my vantage point in the crowded street near the mayor's office, but I had a clear view of the balcony of the mayor's office. On the balcony draped with small plastic blue and white copies of the country's flag, then-President Arnoldo Alemán stood with then-mayor of Masaya, Fernando Padilla, and other functionaries of the mayor's office, all members of the same party. Before the saint's image approached the mayor's

office, Alemán waved to the crowd and threw out baseball caps with the Liberal Alliance logo. He also waved a San Jerónimo t-shirt over his head. However, as the saint approached, a fight broke out on the street below. Alemán ducked back inside the building, but the other people on the balcony stayed watching the argument unfold. After several minutes of angry yelling and gestures of defiance from the *peañeros*, they took up the *peaña* (platform) on which the patron saint sits and the procession moved on down the street without stopping in front of the mayor's office. The procession continued on its pre-arranged route through the city with participants walking and dancing around the image, as brass *chichero* bands played songs traditionally heard during the festival.

I learned later from several informants and articles in the newspapers (Morel 1999; Somarriba 1999) that this was the third year in a row that the *peañeros* had caused a ruckus about whether or not they would position the saint to face Alemán. It was widely interpreted as a public argument about the legitimacy of the Alemán presidency. The *peañeros* argued against turning the saint's image towards the balcony of the mayor's office to show respect to the President. Many people corroborated that Somoza had stood on this same balcony to receive the blessing of the saint. During the Somoza family reign, however, the building was the private home of a Liberal *diputado*⁷ and Somoza associate, Cornelio Hüeck, rather than a public building housing the mayor's office. Alemán of the Liberal Alliance coalition, elected in 1996, was progressively consolidating his power base transforming the coalition into the Constitutional Liberal Party amid charges of influence peddling and corruption. Political commentators expressed fear that Alemán's presidency was a return to a Somocista-style state. The Sandinista Party, the largest in a crowded multi-party field, was an important factor in the opposition, having "governed from below" with direct action in the streets since being voted out of power in 1990 but failing to win the election in 1996.

The incident was an act of defiance against President Alemán. The *peañeros* expressed their political views and exerted their power as an important division of the *cofradía*, one that has pulled away from the official structure of the confraternity organizing itself as a separate group. This open conflict was visible to the local community as well as local and national political leaders. A comparative example is useful for beginning to grasp the significance of this public disagreement. On the same day along side San Jerónimo, another *cofradía* carried an image of Saint Michael the Archangel, whose image the members of this religious brotherhood also carry in the patron saint street procession because the feast day for this saint is September 29. Saint Michael's smaller religious brotherhood carries an image of the archangel that is larger than San Jerónimo but on a much smaller and lighter platform. Among the people carrying Saint Michael's image was the Conservative Party *diputado*, Noel Vidaurre. He helped carry the saint for several blocks until they reached the Church of Our Lady of the Assumption. No comparable struggle broke out among the *cofrades* of Saint Michael in the street in front of the mayor's office, as they turned the image towards the political leaders standing on the balcony and, for several minutes, the procession stopped, observing a respectful blessing for the public officials.

⁷ A *diputado* (deputy) is an elected representative to Nicaragua's one-house legislature called the National Assembly.

The *peañeros* have pulled away from the dominant members of their community, refusing a passive position as a subordinate group. In an interview with a leader of the *peañero* group, I discovered that the *peañeros* had formed a separate group in 1979. Although they do not have legal recognition (*personería jurídica*) as a separate organization granted by the National Assembly, they nonetheless consider themselves a distinct group, organizing themselves for their own self-identified purposes. Within weeks, he informed me, they would meet to endorse a candidate in the mayor's race to take place in 2000. Members of the *peañeros* did not refer to themselves in either class or ethnic terms; instead, they indicated that they had political differences with the other members of the confraternity. They were Sandinistas, while the leaders of the *cofradía* were Liberals.

Official Catholic Church is concerned about the division in the *cofradía*. The president⁸ of the *cofradía*, a university educated professional who is not indigenous and lives in the barrio of San Jerónimo, explains that there is a concerted effort within the Church to end this division between the *peañeros* and the rest of the *cofrades* in the confraternity. He is working to unify the two groups because they should be showing their piety through the veneration of the saint rather showing their ideological differences. He recognizes the split in the confraternity as rooted in socioeconomic differences and heightened ideological sensibilities. The Catholic Church continually reiterates the message that unity should flow down from the hierarchy with obedience being the proper stance of the laity. Efforts to root pagan influences are also mentioned, such as the *peañeros* tell jokes about the sexual organs of the saint, whom they remember as a corrupt man tormented by sexual temptations (Palma 1988:105-106). The lay Catholic president of the *cofradía* objects to this vulgar aspect of their interpretation of the life of Saint Jerome. He says that the *peañeros* have a "twisted vision" (*una visión torcida*) of the saint. He states that his goal is a pastoral one, trying to teach the proper religious attitude for a solemn celebration of the patron saint.

Thus, the Church continues to attempt to control the *cofradías*, but subaltern Indians of Monimbó, empowered by the revolution, continue to use the *cofradía* as a vehicle to projection their identity as a religio-political Subject. Although they may have difficulties staying independent because they lack the religious or secular authority to defend their self-organization, they continue to play an active role in the formation of authority. That Alemán is currently under house arrest for corruption may be partially the result of the opening of space for the voices of the subalterns to influence the political process.

The use of ethnic terms in Nicaragua requires a brief explication. In Nicaraguan scholarly literature, the non-Indian dominant group is referred to as Ladinos (i.e., Romero Vargas 1987), but I did not hear this term used in any everyday conversations. Instead, they used a spatial term referring to the indigenous barrio versus the people of the "center" of the city. The leader of the *cofradía*, commenting on the incident, acknowledged a tacit ethnic division because the *peañeros* are Indians from the barrio Monimbó without using any

⁸ The president explained the structure of the confraternity as a modern one with legal recognition from the National Assembly and a structure of officers that is the same as any civil society organization – president, vice president, etc. - rather than the traditional position of *mayordomo*.

ethnic term to describe himself. The only ethnic term used in Masaya is Indian (*indio*). The Indian is marked by an ethnic reference, while the superior ethnic group goes relatively unmarked. Following John and Jean Comaroff (1992:51), I understand this phenomenon as a primordial tendency to mark identities in opposition to each other, but not primordial in the content or actual “substance” of cultural features of the ethnic group. The subordinate group is the one most likely to carry an ethnic label, while the dominant group in Nicaragua continues to legitimate its social control over the economy and the polity on “civilizational” grounds (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992:52). The political opening provided by the revolution has empowered Monimboseños to assert their political influence with a subtle (rather than strongly articulated) ethnic component. The president of the lay religious brotherhood avoids using any specific ethnic and class terms for describing these differences, being able to use his education to refer to them obliquely as “socio-economic” and “ideological” differences.

Observation of this ritual procession reveals a dynamic, historically significant process in operation in post-revolutionary Nicaragua. A subaltern group contests public authority through the cultural tools at its disposal. Awareness of his social position and agency are evident in the interview with the head of the *peañeros*. He told me with pride that he had no desire to rise out of the ranks of *peañeros* to assume any higher position within the confraternity.

Sandinista class analysis conceived artisans as a revolutionary class (Field 1999:94). Sandinista efforts at providing a revolutionary education through social dramas and political action popularized class analysis, while not incorporating ethnicity due to the limits of the Marxian model. This model encourages the notion of objective economic position in a class structure determining behavior. A fully realized proletarian class has not developed due to lack of industrialization, while class fractions in Nicaragua are complex due to the effects of uneven capitalist penetration and the country’s peripheral insertion into the world-system. The Sandinista Revolution continued the nationalist project of the Conservatives and Liberals before them, to promote the national myth of *mestizaje* (Gould 1993; Gould 1997; Gould 1998), expropriating a romanticized indigenous culture (Whisnant 1995) into an Indo-Hispanic notion of a mixed race. In building this national identity, dominant forces used material and cultural pressures that tended to force assimilation (Field 1998)⁹.

Anthropologist Les Field (1999:98) argues that the artisans of Monimbó rose up as “a rebellious subaltern ethnic community” rather than as a revolutionary class. Field (1999:19) was influenced by working closely with Monimboseño Flavio Gamboa, a self-appointed and self-taught “historian-ethnographer” of Masaya who has, due to his political activism and family history, extensively researched and analyzed the indigenous movement in

⁹ As another dimension of this problem of the national myth of *mestizaje*, when the Sandinistas brought the revolution to the Atlantic Coast, they took actions that showed their ignorance of the cultures of non-Spanish speaking ethnic groups, the Miskitus, Ramas, Sumos, and the African Creole. After disastrous policies during the contra war, the Sandinistas took some strides towards negotiating regional autonomy within the state apparatus (Diskin 1991; Hale 1994; Gordon 1998).

western Nicaragua. Since the occupation of Nicaragua by the Marines, Gould (1997:119-137) finds that their ethnic identity and their national identity was expressed as a strong rejection of North American intervention, a unifying force in the community, while other issues tended to divide them. Although they had economic grievances against Somoza as artisans, not as proletarians, the Marxian class analysis resonated positively with artisans in Monimbó because the stigma attached to Indian ethnicity remains strong (Field 1999:183-187; García Bresó 1992; Gould 1995). Monimboseños appear to be slowly reclaiming the term *indio* after years of resisting the pejorative use of the term. My fieldwork reveals hints of the stigma of being an Indian still prevalent in Masaya. Several of my informants living in the city center volunteered the information that Indians are still in need of civilizing. Some Monimboseños referred to certain people living in the city center who, upon having obtained professional educations, did not positively identify as Indian. Some suspected Indians of using witchcraft as a weapon against those in the city center with whom they had conflicts.

The Sandinista supporters in Monimbó appear to be a major social force behind the continuing popular religious practices, such as the *cofradía* of San Jerónimo. In spite of the importance of the Christian Base Communities as a force behind the Sandinista Revolution and its extensive coverage in the both the scholarly and activist literature (see, e.g. Berryman 1997; Berryman 1987; Cabestrero 1986; Canin 1997; Dodson and O'Shaughnessy 1990; Linkogle 1996; Randall 1983; Reding 1984; Sabia 1997; Shupe and Hadden 1988), the popular religious practices may have more resonance to the subaltern groups galvanized by the promise of the revolution.

Always a minority movement, Christian Base Communities (*comunidades eclesíásticas de base*) suffered loss of momentum and direction after the triumph of the Revolution because many of the most able leaders and active members were drawn into the mass organizations, the military, civil service employment, and other secular political projects (Williams 1992). Liberation theology is a modern pastoral form of worship, using elements of Marxism to analyze economic structures. Not wanting to create schism in the Catholic Church, the CBCs have remained part of the Church and vulnerable to the conservative, anti-Vatican II elements within the international Roman Catholic Church hierarchy. Liberation theology and its base community movement have never represented more than a small minority of the faithful, with commentators such as Phillip Berryman (1987:72) suggesting that it has had a "qualitative" rather than a quantitative impact.

My participant-observation in the Christian Base Community in Masaya reveals that it performs pastoral activities of prayer, Bible reading, and study groups that treat the liberation theology themes, encouraging analysis of economic and social conditions through the lenses of a theology of the poor. Yet, the Christian Base Community shares a similar pastoral, modernizing role with the conservative Catholic charismatic and the *neo-catecumenado* (neo-catechumen) movements than it does with the *cofradía* and the traditional veneration of the saints, in spite of their considerable differences in political perspectives. These three modern currents represent pluralisms in forms of Catholic worship that are consciously competing against the growing challenge of Protestant and Pentecostal movements. Masaya appears to have a rate of

evangelical churches (Protestant and Pentecostal) of about 10%, slightly below the national average of 12% (Ocón Rodríguez 2000).¹⁰

Hints about why liberation theology is not attracting more adherents can be drawn from Rosario Montoya's (1995) fascinating analysis of an unpublished manuscript written by Francisco Berroterán from Río San Juan, Nicaragua. Don Francisco is an artisan in a family shoe-making business who supplements his income by working as a landless agricultural worker. Don Francisco describes his socialist vision and, rather than looking forward with a Marxian analysis in which class struggle leads to a future communist world, he looks back to the model of mutual aid in a peasant community. He paints a utopia based on a romanticized account of his boyhood village as an egalitarian and self-sufficient, pre-capitalist community. The role of saints as intercessors with a distant and stern God is important to Don Francisco. He has not adopted the liberation theology notion of a less threatening God, due to his concept of the sinful nature of a "fallen" humanity. He thinks that evil must be checked by a wrathful God (Montoya 1985:39). Fear is important for controlling human beings, according to Don Francisco, and thus he implicitly rejects the liberation theology substitution of brotherly love. The cultural model of the proper family hierarchy parallels the sacred authority structure of popular religion, and Montoya believes that this traditional family structure is legitimated by traditional religious ideology. Montoya asserts that the patriarchal family structure may be "dispensable" among the middle classes, but she thinks that the family authority structure is necessary for peasant households that strive to maintain independence in a harsh economic and political climate. Montoya's analysis suggests an important explanation for continued devotion to the veneration of saints in Nicaragua, but I disagree with her characterization of Don Francisco as a peasant. In my estimation, he is an artisan working in an agrarian society, similar to the artisans of Monimbó. Male artisans in Monimbó, like don Francisco, are not persuaded by liberation theology because it undermines family authority structures. It also rationalizes the practice of Christianity away from popular religion (the veneration of saints) towards an ethic of brotherly love and individual commitment to social justice.

¹⁰ Mariela Ocón Rodríguez (2000) reports that, according to a census taken by the evangelical churches in 1997, they claim to have converted about 12% of the population. Hard number figures are given for each department along with the population of each department from the 1997 report by the Instituto Nicaragüense de Evangelismo de Fondo (INDEF). Masaya is under this national average at 10% of the population of the department, while Managua leads them all on the west coast at 14%, with Jinotega being second with 13%. Two departments tie for third place: Carazo and Nueva Segovia with 12%. The Atlantic coast has traditionally been Protestant with the Moravian Church being dominant. They have the highest levels of non-Catholic church membership: RAAN has 37% and RAAS has 16%. All share a goal to bring men into the life of the Catholic Church. Anthony Gill's (1998) thesis that the variable strength of liberation theology can be explained by correlating it with the rival strength of Protestant or Pentecostal movements should be expanded to the Catholic charismatic and *neo-catecumbenado* movements. All trace their roots to an interpretation of Vatican II and its emphasis on small group worship, making the Church a more personal place, seeking to address the individual needs of worshippers.

Conclusion

Anthropologists have a long tradition of studying ritual process, and now that we have taken the turn towards historical anthropology, this new approach opens our eyes to the analysis of ritual as “a principal site of new history being made” (Kelly and Kaplan 1990:141). Change and continuity are present in the way Catholic popular religion continues to serve as a cultural resource for expressing “peoplehood” (Berryman 1987:71) and participating in the dynamic processes of reproducing, contesting, transforming, and deconstructing authority. My conclusion is not a new or startling revelation, but an ethnographic confirmation that this socio-cultural process continues in post-revolutionary Nicaragua. Empowered by the triumph of the revolution, Monimboseños spontaneously expressed their new freedom by carrying the patron saint in Monimbó. Before 1979, the saint had never traveled the streets and paths of the indigenous barrio. Institutionalized as the Octave of San Jerónimo, this marks an important innovation in the celebration. This innovation in community life is an illustrative incident that reveals ritual as “a principal site of new history being made” (Kelly and Kaplan 1990:141). As artisans in a “rebellious subaltern ethnic community” (Field 1999), they recognize themselves as a self-defined group empowered by the revolution to ritually redraw the sacred boundaries around the city, thereby including themselves in the wider community.

As the political counter-revolution attempts to re-consolidate its power, continuously condemning the socialist alternatives to neoliberalism, ethnic subaltern groups on the Pacific Coast feel the effects of the dominant groups to reimpose their control. On the barrio level, Sandinista supporters participate more in *cofradías* for the veneration of saints than any of the modern forms of Catholic worship. My analysis highlights the *cofradía* with its group of male *peñeros* separating themselves from the influence and control of the higher status individuals as an alternative way of expressing identity (including political views) that has a longer history than liberation theology and is based on the “apt performance” of the ritual as a network of “motivated practices” rather than symbolic or theological analysis. The *peñeros* continue an ethnicity-based politics expressed through ritual as male citizens who remain marginalized in the political process and by the Catholic Church hierarchy.

Popular Catholic religiosity continues to appeal more than modern forms of Catholic worship, including the Christian Base Communities, because the religious brotherhood or confraternity (*cofradía*) is an enduring social institution. Popular religion continues to support an authoritarian, male-dominated family structure and a view of God as a severe judge of human sinfulness that belie any easy transition to a democratic polity based on separation of religion and politics and gender equality. The male subaltern Subject, empowered by the revolution, is making history through ritual, contesting the legitimation of authority and having a transformative effect on authority in post-Sandinista Nicaragua. Monimboseños do not see their sacred image as a static object for display in a church but as an extension of their self-identity that properly moves through the profane world, widening their sense of entitlement to recognition as autonomous agents in their world. Those that carry the image in the streets engage in ritual practices that perform the actors’

dynamic place in the community and is intimately connected with contemporary political struggles.

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Learn more about the current Patron Saint Festivities in Nicaragua's capital city in this Special, including interesting information about how this initiated and developed over time. The Minguito Procession. In the afternoon the ship is handed over at the El Zumen sector to a committee of inhabitants of the San Judas district, who takes it a couple kilometers south to San Judas. At night festivities take place at this neighborhood with many people participating, and around midnight the ship is symbolically handed over to the head of the festivities, who is accompanied by Miss India Bonita. Sandinista, one of a Nicaraguan group that overthrew President Anastasio Somoza Debayle in 1979, ending 46 years of dictatorship by the Somoza family. The Sandinistas governed Nicaragua from 1979 to 1990. Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega was reelected as president in 2006, 2011, and 2016. Named for. { "522138": { "url": "/topic/Sandinista", "shareUrl": "https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sandinista", "title": "Sandinista", "documentGroup": "TOPIC PAGINATED MEDIUM", "gaExtraDimensions": {"3": "false"} } }. Sandinista. political and military organization, Nicaragua. Article. Media. Saint David is the patron saint of Wales. Patron saints are chosen as special protectors or guardians over all areas of life. Traditionally people see them as symbols of how to live a better life. You can have patron saints of all sorts of things, like jobs, organisations and animals. For example, St Francis of Assisi loved nature and wildlife so he was made the patron saint of animals. But nations can have patron saints too. Saint Patrick's Day started as a religious feast to celebrate Saint Patrick's work, but it's grown to be an international festival of all things Irish. Getty Images. Spectators in Dublin wear leprechauns' hats at the St Patrick's Day parade. People take part in parades and dancing, eat Irish food, and enjoy firework displays.