

Columbia University Libraries Research Award Program

Final Report

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The Columbia Libraries Research Grant has allowed me to conduct archival research at the *Burke Theological Library* of the Union Theological Institute to help expand my ongoing research on the Ayoreo people of Paraguay and Bolivia, which I am conducting as part of my Ph.D. requirement in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Arizona. As part of this award, I conducted archival research for the research entitled: *Reading Between the Lines: Exploring Self-Representations of Missionaries and their Constructions of Ayoreo Christianity in the New Tribes Mission Periodicals*. The analysis of the data has been successfully incorporated into one of the chapters (on the making) of my Ph.D. dissertation entitled: *Intimate Encounters: Rewriting Ethics, Indigenous Sexualities, and Christianity among the Ayoreo Indigenous Peoples of the Paraguayan Chaco*. I also plan to publish an article in an academic journal based on the data gathered through this award.

My dissertation, which is based on 49 months of long-term fieldwork, interrogates how practices of Ayoreo ‘sex work’ shape women’s subjectivities in a context of engagements with the market economy and intense Christian missionization. To do so, it critically examines the cultural meanings of Ayoreo ‘sex work’ to understand how colliding ethical systems shape the cultural production of gender, indigeneity, and agency.

One of the main components of my research focuses on the examination of the cultural logics of Ayoreo conversion to Christianity, in order to understand how Ayoreo epistemologies of gender and sexuality were re-negotiated at the level of ethical practice as they transitioned into Christian mission life. Ayoreo missionization has been fostered

by members of the New Tribes Mission, an US-based evangelical missionary society working among them since the 1940s.

As part of my research the Burke Theological Library, I was able to access the two main New Tribes Mission's institutional periodicals: *Brown Gold* and *NTM@Work*, along with other books on the work of the New Tribes Mission in Paraguay and Bolivia. Due to lack of space, below I will outline my research goals, and briefly mention major findings for each goal. The description and analysis of the complete set of data gathered is currently being worked on in my dissertation chapter entitled: *Contact with New Tribes Missionaries and Life in Missions in the Context of Economic Expansion*.

Research objectives:

I. Explore the NTM official missionary discourse and rhetoric used in their publications in order to understand and analyze their religious ideology and working methodologies in missionary settings.

The following quote from one of the NTM publications reveals an ongoing theme in most of the periodicals: the ideological link made by missionaries between 'hard work and conversion':

"Our purpose in all this is to create confidence in us and to make our presence valuable to them until we can get the message of salvation to them, teach them to read, and establish an indigenous church. Their culture of necessity must be changed from a nomadic to a village people where they can settle and learn how to work". (*Brown Gold*, 1948)

An important finding is that work was a major theme of the missionary project among the Ayoreo. The recurring trope of missionaries which came up in the periodicals reveals that with time, they wanted Ayoreo people to achieve a level of economic self-sufficiency and independence. However, the writings reveal that, all the economic

activities in the mission took place in the context of a patron-client relationship by which the missionaries became employers of the Ayoreo, and also the exclusive provider of services. In this way, the proceedings of missionaries contradicted their rhetoric, as it becomes evident that the Ayoreo were never really involved in administrative and decision-making processes. Their participation was limited to be deployed as labor force for the mission. Interestingly, there was no reference in the writings to the consequences of the patron-client relation and how this reinforced unequal power dynamics at the mission post.

II. Identify discursive tropes that come up in missionary narratives of Ayoreo to understand how missionaries discursively construct this group of people.

The NTM periodicals reveal how initial encounters between Ayoreo and missionaries fostered a discursive construction of the Ayoreo as 'wild' and 'savages' subjects and therefore in need to be 'civilized' through Christianization. Quotes such as the followings are persistent in the publications, mainly during the initial decades of the missionary project:

"No, the native is not a happy person merrily romping through the jungle in perfect harmony with nature as many anthropologists would try to make one believe. He is a person lacking true purpose and fulfillment in life" (Brown Gold, 1945).

"In the natural, it would be hard to love them, but when we realize that they are wandering around in darkness and dying without Christ, his love fills our heart and goes out to them." (Brown Gold, 1956)

In my research, I argue that these discourses provided a coherent justification for their missionary endeavor and their process of establishing and sustaining relations of domination through the process of Christianization and 'civilization'. Overall, such discourses reveal missionary expectations to incorporate Ayoreo into their 'natural' order

of things, i.e. their western European ideology of hard work, development and Christian faith, as the following quote also reveals:

"Over and over again we would wonder at their dirtiness, their extreme ignorance. Always we are amazed how normal human beings could sink so low as to be so much like the forest from which they came. But the only answer can be in the fact that it is a result of man left to himself [...] these new contacts open to missionaries one of the greatest opportunities we have yet encountered in South America among savage Indians" (NTM 1950).

III. Gather specific information on their missionary work among the Ayoreo in Paraguay and Bolivia to analyze the ways in which the mission constructs their history of relations with Ayoreo, and how they view social aspects of Ayoreo culture

Several missionaries wrote in the periodicals about their impressions of different aspects that make up Ayoreo 'culture'. One of the missionaries for example mentioned:

"Most primitive tribal people are steeped in cultural practices initiated and motivated by superstition and fear. 'Religion,' usually the cultural hub from which almost all aspects of the native cultures derive, is generally a spiritist form of worship which is energized by satanic forces" (Brown Gold, 1976)

Such perceptions of Ayoreo, were not uncommon of missionaries writing in the periodicals. They portrayed Ayoreo culture as 'satanic' and therefore as in need to be eradicated. While their culture was seen as a hindrance to conversion, from an analysis of the periodicals, I argue that they also perceived it as hindrance to the economic development of the region. I show how their writings reveal how one of main goals of missionaries was the creation of a 'missionized' Ayoreo subject through the inculcation of subtle European values would also later facilitate the Paraguayan project of economic expansion, in which the Ayoreo would also be deployed as a labor force.

Importantly, what the writings do not show is how the presence of the mission *per se* led the Ayoreo into a dialogue of their own, one in which by acknowledging the contrasts

between their own and the European ways of being, paradoxically served to contest the missionizing project itself, something I develop extensively in my thesis chapter.

IV. Analyze how the NTM describe Ayoreo process of conversion over time, and how they measure the successes and/or challenges in their missionary work.

On the one hand, an important achievement for NTM missionaries has been the success of their language program. As a result of it, missionaries have been able to translate the bible into different languages. This is a topic that proudly comes up in most of the NTM publications. Unlike other missionaries (i.e. of other religious affiliations), NMT missionaries became known for the mastery of the languages of the people they worked with. This gave them the unique opportunity to evangelize in the native's language, as a missionary put it in his own words:

"The Ayore tribe, the most feared years ago, has been evangelized in their own language" (NTM@work, 2001)

On the other hand, the challenges of missionary work are mostly framed in terms of the 'savage' nature of Ayoreo culture rather than the cultural and economic limitations of missionaries themselves. In this vein, it is not surprising to note that there is no reference to the ways in which Ayoreo responded to the process of Christianization and the impact it had on the ruptures and continues of Ayoreo culture.

Concluding Thoughts

Archival work conducted at the Burke Theological Library during the Fall of 2012 have given me the opportunity to access valuable information and a unique perspective on the work of New Tribes Missionaries among Ayoreo people in Paraguay and Bolivia. I have been able to gather data from most of the Brown Gold periodicals and other materials on and by the New Tribes Mission available at the library which are currently

being analyzed as part of my dissertation work. The Columbia Libraries Research Grant has supported my ticket and travel costs, for which I am very grateful. I plan to acknowledge the support of the Grant by citing it my upcoming publications on the topic.

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