

TIMUCUA AND THE COLONIAL SYSTEM IN FLORIDA:
THE REBELLION OF 1656

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Introduction

In May of 1655, an English fleet returning from a failed attempt to conquer Hispaniola landed in what is now Kingston Harbor, ultimately resulting in the transfer of the island of Jamaica from Spanish to British rule. While this event was to have many consequences, perhaps one of the more obscure unfolded the following year in Spanish Florida, more than eight hundred miles to the north. Although the conquering English fleet returned to Britain in the fall of 1655, intelligence gathered by the Spanish ambassador to England revealed British designs for the fleet to return the next year, one of its goals being the conquest of Spanish Florida by a land assault (Ranjel 1660). Fearing a repeat of the events in Jamaica the previous spring, King Philip IV of Spain quickly dispatched a warning to the Governor of Florida, commanding that precautions be taken immediately.

When this Royal Cedula finally arrived in St. Augustine in early April of 1656, its urgency was underlined by more recent news from the Governor of Havana, who reported the presence of an English fleet somewhere off the coast of Cuba. At that time, however, the presidio of St. Augustine, was severely undermanned and undersupplied. Faced with the threat of imminent attack, the Governor of Florida issued orders for the immediate activation of the standing Indian militia within the mission provinces, stipulating furthermore that each and every warrior, including caciques and other leaders, was to carry enough corn on his back

for a month's sustenance, during which time further provisions might be brought from elsewhere (Ranjel 1660).

This order served as the spark which ultimately ignited a full-scale Indian rebellion in the interior mission province of Timucua. Lucas Menendez, principal cacique of Timucua, ordered the murders of all secular Spaniards in the province, and while only seven deaths resulted from his command, the trial following the pacification of Timucua province led to the execution of nearly the entire aboriginal leadership of Timucua, paving the way for massive political and geographical restructuring of the province. The Timucuan Rebellion thus swept away many of the last vestiges of aboriginal political and settlement structure, accelerating the full integration of the Timucua province into the developing colonial system of Spanish Florida.

Why did the Governor's activation of the Indian militia spark a rebellion which resulted in the rapid structural transformation of an aboriginal society after nearly fifty years of comparative stability under conditions of missionization? In order to discover an answer to this question, it is necessary to examine the historical development of the colonial system of Spanish Florida, and the process by which the Timucua province was gradually integrated into this system. An examination of the expectations of aboriginal leaders who initiated the process of missionization during the late sixteenth century, when compared with the actual political consequences of integration into the

Spanish colonial system, reveals serious discrepancies. Ultimately, the roots of the 1656 uprising seem to rest in the gradual erosion of political power among aboriginal leaders. The Timucuan Rebellion therefore served as the outcome of a political struggle which eventually decided the structural position of Timucua province within the colonial system.

Early Spanish Contact with Timucua

The Timucua province in 1656 was an aboriginal society molded by half a century of interaction with Spanish friars and soldiers based in St. Augustine, and thus in order to understand the stage upon which the Timucuan Rebellion was ultimately played out, an overview of this region prior to and during the first fifty years of missionization is necessary. Recent archaeological research indicates that the region which eventually came to be known as the Timucua province constituted a distinctive zone of related aboriginal material culture as early as A.D. 900 (Johnson 1991; Worth n.d.). Following the transformation and disappearance of the well-known and broadly distributed Weeden Island culture between A.D. 700 and 900, the regions of North and North-Central Florida became an increasingly isolated zone inhabited by aboriginal groups sharing typologically similar ceramic complexes, along with other elements of material culture.

The aboriginal inhabitants of interior North and North-

Central Florida first encountered Spaniards in the form of Hernando de Soto, who marched through these regions late in the summer of 1539 with an army of more than 600 in search of the famed chiefdom of Apalachee (Hudson and Milanich n.d.). Several independent towns and two regional chiefdoms were encountered, and while the names are distinct from later provinces, the political geography seems to have remained relatively stable over the next quarter century.

After the passage of the Soto expedition, the Indians of this region were not contacted again until the mid-1560's, when French and Spanish colonists became aware of a province named Potano in North-Central Florida (see Lyon 1976; Hudson and Milanich n.d.). Over the course of two decades following the 1565 foundation of St. Augustine, the Potano remained a thorn in the side of Spanish, warring against Spanish-allied Indian societies along the St. Johns River. A 1584 raid succeeded in destroying the principal town of Potano, forcing its relocation to the west (Arguelles 1598).

Not until the very end of the sixteenth century were comparatively peaceful relations finally established with the inhabitants of interior Florida. The effects of the various skirmishes between 1539 and 1584 on these societies are poorly understood, but when the caciques of two interior provinces -- Potano and Timucua -- first pledged allegiance to the Spanish crown in 1597 (Mugado 1597), a process was begun in which the

Indians of interior Florida were gradually integrated into the expanding colonial system centered at St. Augustine. As will be seen, however, several features of this system set up tensions and stresses which flared into open hostility in 1656.

The Missionization of Timucua

A brief missionary visit in the provinces of Potano and Timucua in 1597 (Lopez 1602) was followed by limited contact with the Potano during the first years of the seventeenth century. Beginning in 1606, however, the regions of North and North-Central Florida were missionized in three waves, corresponding to existing aboriginal sociopolitical structure. In each case, the principal town of each province was missionized first, beginning with the principal cacique, soon followed by the establishment of missions at a handful of subordinate local centers within the province. The province of Potano was missionized beginning in 1606, followed by the Timucua province beginning in 1608 (Ore 1936), ending with the province of Cotocochuni, or Yustaga, after 1623 (Ocaña 1635). By the early 1630's most or all of the missions within these three provinces had been founded, paving the way for the establishment of the Apalachee mission province in 1633 (see Hann 1988). What came to be referred to as the Timucua province comprised the remnants of the original Potano, Timucua, and Yustaga provinces, linked to form a single mission province with essentially four levels of sociopolitical

integration.

Given that the establishment of mission provinces effectively served as the first step in the process by which aboriginal societies were integrated into the Spanish colonial system, it is instructive to examine the goals and expectations of the aboriginal leaders who, one by one, accepted Franciscan friars into their midst. Significantly, this acceptance was always prefaced or accompanied by a pledge of allegiance to the Spanish crown. In effect, therefore, Indian caciques who accepted friars not only subordinated themselves and their vassals to the Catholic church, but also to the Spanish king through his representative, the governor of Florida. Why did aboriginal leaders so readily accept such subordination by an external power?

It may be argued that the caciques of Florida were not so much prostrating themselves beneath their new Spanish neighbors as they were bolstering their own political power within their respective provinces. Considering the obvious power represented by the presence of the Spaniards in St. Augustine after 1565, aboriginal leaders seem to have willingly acted as "power brokers", augmenting their own political standing within aboriginal society by initiating and regulating the flow of power and goods (in many ways interconnected) between Spaniards and Indians. Thus while caciques were theoretically losing political supremacy, they presumably maintained and even enhanced their own

local and regional power.

The initial pledge of allegiance to the Spanish crown carried responsibilities, but also benefits, most notably among which was the distribution of trade goods, including iron tools and European clothing and beads. Arguments have been made that such trade goods served as symbols of rank, as such reinforcing internal political power for leaders controlling access to these items (e.g Knight 1985). Indeed, such a pattern seems to have played a significant role in chiefly power during the prehistoric period, making the acquisition of Spanish goods merely a continuation of an existing system. It is no wonder, then, that Florida caciques rapidly followed one another in rendering obedience to the Spanish crown. To fail to do so was to allow other leaders and provinces to gain the upper hand in regional politics.

The acceptance of missionaries may also be viewed as an attempt to bolster political power, for the priests themselves served as intermediaries between the Catholic church and the Indians. In most cases, Franciscan friars do not seem to have supplanted Indian caciques, but rather served as religious practitioners and teachers within a society governed by aboriginal leaders. By accepting these priests, caciques effectively regulated the flow of information, both natural and supernatural, from the Spaniards.

In effect, then, the decision of Indian caciques to pledge

allegiance to the Spanish crown and to accept Spanish missionaries seems to have represented an attempt to maintain and augment personal political power. There is no reason to believe that such a phenomenon was novel, for the continual appearance and eventual fragmentation of prehistoric Southeastern chiefdoms may well have followed the same pattern (e.g. Anderson 1990). The ebb and flow of political power seems to have been linked with the establishment of trading partnerships and tributary relationships, fueled not so much by conquest as by attractive force. It has even been argued that political power served as a magnet for actual migration (Williams and Smith 1989).

Integration of Timucua into the Colonial System

Keeping in mind the hypothesized goals of aboriginal leaders in initiating the process of missionization, what were the actual consequences of missionization for aboriginal societies in general, and the Timucua province in particular? Breaking this question down into the acceptance of missionaries and the pledge of allegiance to the Spanish crown, it is useful to examine the benefits and responsibilities represented by each. The acceptance of a resident friar, and the concomitant establishment of a mission province, provided several benefits. Beyond the fact that the priest represented a more or less direct line of access to the Spanish church and God, resulting in the augmentation of the political power of the cacique who accepted

and supported him, the missionary additionally served as an agent for the exchange of cultural knowledge, or acculturation, providing information and knowledge of a practical nature. This included the introduction of some Spanish foods, along with the techniques for growing them.

The responsibilities which resulted with the acceptance of a resident friar were, however, considerable. Not only were the Indians expected to convert to Catholicism, involving a new religious and ethical system, along with new rituals and languages, but they also were expected to support the priest, both in terms of his sustenance as well as the construction and maintenance of a church and convent. Indians also provided courier and transportation services for the friar.

Archaeological and historical evidence for the first half of the seventeenth century suggests that the responsibilities may have overwhelmed the benefits. There is precious little hard evidence for the transfer of practical Spanish knowledge, such as techniques for architecture or food production, or large quantities of Spanish foods (e.g. Weisman n.d.), while the evidence suggests a considerable burden as regards the responsibilities associated with missionization, particularly in terms of labor.

What is perhaps even more striking, moreover, is the burden imposed by secular representatives of the Spanish crown in St. Augustine. In exchange for recognition as aboriginal leaders,

along with a small number of gifts given to Indian caciques at the beginning of each Spanish governor's term, each Indian province was expected to provide inordinate amounts of labor to support the colonial garrison at St. Augustine. This labor requirement included a yearly contingent of Indians to be sent to the soldier's fields outside the city to grow corn, as well as for other public works such as the construction and maintenance of the fort. Indians were also couriers and bearers for the Spanish infantry, and provided sustenance and housing for transient and resident soldiers in the mission provinces. Finally, the mission provinces were organized into a standing militia, formalized toward the middle of the seventeenth century, augmenting the Spanish garrison in St. Augustine. Warriors were given training, and in some cases Spanish weapons, and were occasionally dispatched with a smaller force of Spanish infantry on military expeditions.

The success of this system appears to have been predicated upon the political status of Indian caciques within the system. As aboriginal leaders, the caciques served as power brokers, always functioning as intermediaries between the Spanish crown and church and the Indians within each aboriginal province. Indeed, this seems to have been a major goal of the caciques who first accepted Spanish missionaries, and in many ways their very role as leaders depended upon such a position. As will be seen, however, inherent problems in the colonial system of Spanish

Florida gradually eroded chiefly power in the Timucua province, ultimately countering the original expectations of caciques who permitted missionization.

By the midpoint of the seventeenth century, the Timucua province had become a full participant in this developing colonial system. Fifty years of intensive contact with Spanish friars and soldiers, however, had produced an unexpected effect: disease, starvation, overwork, and flight had severely depopulated the entire province. Only a decade after the foundation of the first missions in Timucua, friars reported epidemics which had wiped out half the converted population (Pareja, et al. 1617). Reports from later years indicate that this was no isolated incident, and that the number of dead and fugitive Indians continued to threaten the ability of Timucua to provide labor for St. Augustine.

During this same period, St. Augustine, as a remote and unproductive garrison town on the northern frontier of the Spanish empire, suffered continually from shortfalls in people and provisions. The inhabitants in St. Augustine grew more and more dependent upon the labor provided by the Indians of the mission provinces. While under normal circumstances, such a system of dependency might have worked, the rapid demographic decline being experienced in the mission provinces created a tragic scenario.

As Indian populations plummeted in the oldest and nearest

mission provinces, new provinces were founded, tapping fresh population reserves farther into the interior. This expanding "shock wave" of depopulation forced the continual flow of Indian populations from west to east, repopulating the oldest and most devastated provinces in an effort to maintain the link of communication and transportation between St. Augustine and its crucial aboriginal labor pool. Archaeological data provide sound evidence for this massive relocation within Timucua, for within the space of only a few decades, the prehistoric ceramic complexes of North and North-Central Florida were transformed and replaced by extralocal ceramics originating in Apalache and perhaps Yustaga (Weisman n.d.; Worth n.d.). Even this influx of extralocal population could not correct the shock wave effect, leaving Timucua in 1656 with a marked demographic imbalance, with its traditional political center far to the east of what seems to have been the 1656 demographic center in the Yustaga region.

In sum, the stresses of the labor system in concert with sharp demographic decline resulted in an inherently imbalanced colonial system. Over the course of half a century of missionization, the Timucua province was gradually drawn into an increasingly unbalanced relationship with the Spanish colony at St. Augustine. Whereas in theory, the mission provinces represented a more or less autonomous "Indian republic" under the supervision and guidance of the Spanish crown and church (see McAlister 1984; Bushnell 1989), the mission provinces of Spanish

Florida, and Timucua in particular, experienced a subtle but continual erosion of this status. Ever more surely, the mission provinces of Florida became a vast labor pool for the Spanish garrison town of St. Augustine, leading to tensions between Indians and Spaniards. In 1656, however, these tensions came to a boil, resulting in rebellion.

The Timucuan Rebellion

The full story of the Timucuan Rebellion, based primarily on a large amount of previously unexamined Spanish documentation in the Archive of the Indies (Ranjel 1660), represents a complex and dramatic tale, and is beyond the scope of this paper. What is clear, however, is that much of the fault for the uprising must be given to the governor of Florida in 1656, Diego de Rebolledo.

Eventually convicted posthumously of flagrant corruption, Governor Rebolledo effectively fanned the flames of resentment among the aboriginal leaders of Florida, and particularly Timucua. On top of fifty years of oppressive labor policies combined with heavy epidemics and associated migration, already eroding the political status of Indian caciques, Rebolledo exasperated the situation by failing to present the leaders of Timucua with the customary gifts and food upon his arrival, retaining all he could for the illicit trade with the Ays and Apalachicola Indians. As a land-locked and severely depopulated province, Timucua provided few benefits for Rebolledo's smuggling

activities, and thus the caciques of Timucua seem to have been given particularly poor treatment. Heavy epidemics in 1655 wiped out nearly half the native population of Timucua, but Rebolledo demanded even more laborers than the previous year, earning him the particular disgust of the Timucua leaders.

Perceiving a drastic decline in his own political power, the principal cacique of Timucua, Lucas Menendez, complained that he was no longer cacique of Timucua, nor was any attention paid to him. Other direct quotes from Lucas and several Timucua caciques confirm that Rebolledo was a hated governor, and that tensions had perhaps never been higher than in the spring of 1656. Upon learning of the governor's 1656 order for the immediate activation of the standing Indian militia and for the personal transport of each warrior's corn, Lucas Menendez began to garner support among his fellow caciques for a stand against the Governor, arguing that Rebolledo wished to enslave the Indians. Apparently urged on by a Franciscan friar, a letter of refusal was dispatched with a pair of messengers to the Governor, along with a supporting letter from the friar.

Although Rebolledo's reply was negative, it played no role in the rebellion. Two of the only five soldiers in the western interior at that time were murdered before the return of the messengers. Upon learning of the order to kill all secular Spaniards, the two messengers returning with Rebolledo's response clubbed a Spanish servant and a Mexican Indian to death next to

the Suwannee River, and Lucas Menendez himself next led a raid on the cattle ranch of Lachua, in which a third soldier was killed along with two African slaves, sparing only the owner of the ranch, a personal friend of Lucas. The caciques of nearly every mission town in Timucua soon converged on Santa Elena de Machava, where they hurriedly constructed a fortified palisade, waiting for the expected Spanish response.

Several attempts by the rebels to consolidate support for the uprising among the leaders of Apalache and Guale provinces proved fruitless, and a force of 60 Spanish infantry was dispatched in September to pacify Timucua. Gaining the support and assistance of the caciques of Apalache, along with several Spanish-allied Timucuan caciques, the Spanish soldiers eventually captured the rebel leaders of Timucua without further violence. While the aftermath of the rebellion will not be explored here, it suffices to note that eleven Indians, including six of the most powerful caciques of Timucua, were hanged at strategic locations across the province. The rest of the rebel leaders were condemned to forced labor in St. Augustine. All the Spanish-allied Timucuan caciques were emplaced as the new provincial leaders, and the Timucua province was structurally transformed from a dispersed aboriginally-based settlement pattern into a linear pattern based on the needs of the Spanish colonial system, resettling the more distant mission towns in an effort to repopulate the devastated eastern stretches of the Camino Real (Rebolledo 1657; Ranjel

1660).

After the rebellion, Timucua became a simple chain of populated way-stations between the populous and well-provisioned Apalache province and the city of St. Augustine, effectively finalizing the structural integration of Timucua into the colonial system of Spanish Florida. Perhaps more significantly, the Timucuan Rebellion settled the question of political autonomy for the "Indian republics" of Florida, representing the culmination of a political contest which had been building for half a century. The uprising essentially reflected a jurisdictional struggle between the aboriginal leaders of the Timucua province and the Spanish military leaders of St. Augustine. At stake was the position of aboriginal leaders within the political structure of colonial Spanish Florida, and the degree of autonomy within the mission provinces. In this regard, the Timucuan Rebellion may be viewed as a power struggle between the caciques of Timucua and the governor of St. Augustine.

Unlike the Guale Revolt of 1597 and the Apalache Revolt of 1647, Timucuan Rebellion was not directed against the Franciscan friars, who generally seem to have been content with the role of caciques as power brokers. Indeed, not a single friar was harmed in the rebellion, and cries of conspiracy were leveled against the missionaries, though never proved. During the uprising, Lucas Menendez even stated that the Timucuan were not rejecting

the Spanish church or crown, and that after having gone back to Spain, the Spaniards would be permitted to return after six years, when he would once again be of good heart (San Antonio, et al. 1657; Ranjel 1660).

The Timucuan Rebellion was the last attempt to resist the complete subordination of aboriginal leaders under the Spanish military government of Florida. Nearly half a century of missionization had slowly eroded the political power of the Timucua caciques, but the system persisted as long as the caciques retained even a portion of their status as intermediaries, reinforcing their dwindling hold on power. The caciques were at least given gifts and special treatment, and were allowed to select the common Indians for the more onerous tasks of the labor draft, serving also as officers in the Indian militia.

With his continual disregard for their status, and the ill-advised 1656 order that the previously privileged caciques should be forced to carry their own food on their backs, Governor Rebolledo swept away any possible reason for the caciques of Timucua to continue tolerating the abuses of missionization, effectively negating the original reason for accepting missionaries and pledging allegiance in the first place. Faced with their relegation to the status of common laborers, the caciques of Timucua took up arms against the Spaniards. Although the goal of the Timucuan Rebellion was to regain control over

their own society, Lucas Menendez and the other caciques of Timucua ultimately succeeded only in accelerating the complete integration of Timucua into the colonial system of Spanish Florida.

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