

Colombian Counterpoint: Transculturation in Sibundoy Valley Ethnohistory

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Abstract

Anthropological and historical scholarship on cultural change in colonially subordinated cultures has often stressed deculturation—cultural loss and degradation—as a consequence of colonialism. This paper disputes that narrative by presenting the case of Indigenous cultural change in the Sibundoy Valley of southwest Colombia from an ethnohistorical perspective. Drawing on historical, ethnographic, and theoretical texts, and relying on the concept of transculturation—understood as a complex process of partial loss, partial gain, and the creation of new cultural phenomena from intercultural encounters—as a more nuanced alternative to deculturation, I outline the history of cultural change in the valley from the prehispanic period to the present. While recognizing that colonialism was experienced as a catastrophe for the Indigenous communities of the valley, I suggest that the latter’s deep historical experience of transculturation in the prehispanic era enabled the preservation and rearticulation of core elements of their native cultures in the post-contact period. That experience allowed for the incorporation of foreign, colonially imposed cultural elements into the pre-existing cultural framework of the valley. The historical continuity of the transcultural experience in the valley demonstrates that its Indigenous communities have not been passive subjects of colonial power, but active agents in negotiating and mitigating its deculturating effects. This approach emphasizes the historical agency of Sibundoy Valley natives and positions them as the central protagonists of their own history, suggesting the applicability of this perspective to other situations of cultural change in colonial contexts.

Colombian Counterpoint: Transculturation in Sibundoy Valley Ethnohistory

The question of how cultures change as a result of contact and exchange with others, particularly in situations of power imbalance, is one that has animated much discussion in anthropology, history, and related fields. Despite theoretical advancements in recent decades, much of the scholarship addressing issues of intercultural contact and transformation, especially in colonial situations, retains an anachronistic focus on the deculturation—that is, cultural loss and degradation—of subordinated cultures. This approach tends to emphasize processes of assimilation in intercultural situations where one could instead identify practices of mediation, accommodation, and resistance. To focus on loss over adaptation minimizes the historical agency of subordinated cultures and obscures a view of the ways in which they preserve and rearticulate elements of their traditional cultures under the pressures of external cultural impositions. Such erasure is commonly expressed in the popular misconception that Indigenous¹ and other subordinated groups have all but entirely disappeared or assimilated to dominant cultures, and that little of their own cultures now remains.

This study presents the case of Indigenous transculturation in the Sibundoy Valley of southwest Colombia in order to dispute the narrative that cultural change must entail the destruction and subsequent replacement of subordinated cultures by dominating ones. A more historically sound and socially just interpretation of cultural change is one that, without minimizing the traumas of colonialism, centers the ways in which subordinated cultures mediate and mitigate its effects by selectively adapting certain colonially imposed cultural elements while preserving and rearticulating native ones in novel and resilient ways. This is

¹ This study employs the terms “Indigenous” and “native” interchangeably, although with preference for the former. Terminology concerning the Indigenous peoples of the Americas—and “Indigenous” itself is not a politically neutral term—is fraught with controversy and uncertainty, and the term “native” is especially suspect, given its (mis)use in the classic literature of anthropology and other fields. While recognizing the importance of problematizing such terminology, it is outside the ambit of this study to intervene in that debate. “Indigenous” and “native” here refer collectively to the two autochthonous ethnic groups to inhabit the Sibundoy Valley since prehispanic times, the Inga and the Kamëntšá, or other autochthonous ethnicities of the broader region. When a particular group is being discussed, its proper name is used to distinguish it from the collective “Indigenous.”

precisely what occurred in the Sibundoy Valley. I employ the term “transculturation” to describe the complex process of cultural change—partial loss, partial gain, and the creation of new cultural phenomena—as it operated in the Sibundoy Valley both before and after the colonial encounter in 1535.² I suggest that the Sibundoy Valley provides an excellent case study of transculturation and cultural survival among colonized cultures in general.

As an ethnohistory, this study employs historical, ethnographic, and Indigenous sources in order to interpret transculturation as it has operated at various points and in different cultural domains in the prehispanic, colonial, and contemporary history of the Sibundoy Valley. I begin by exploring the prehispanic history of transculturation in and around the Sibundoy Valley by examining processes of trade, mobility, and cultural borrowing in domains such as religion, shamanism, and ethnobotany. This analysis argues that the adaptive structures that enabled cultural survival following the colonial encounter were inscribed in the native cultures of the valley by transcultural experiences in the deep past. I then use two early colonial primary sources to examine transculturation in the wake of the colonial encounter, focusing on the emergence of a syncretic Catholicism overlaying native religious substrata, the incorporation of foreign elements into the native mythic corpus, and Indigenous adaptations to colonial legal forms. Finally, I turn my attention to transculturation as it occurred in the most transformative phase of colonialism in the valley: the Capuchin mission of the twentieth century. In this period of intense repression—which also witnessed the rapid colonization of the valley by white and mestizo settlers from other regions of Colombia—native cultures underwent a process of concealment and rearticulation

² “The colonial encounter” may be understood, on the one hand, as the historically determinate moment of contact between Europeans and Indigenous peoples in which the former positioned themselves as superior to the latter within the colonial system they were constructing in the Americas; and on the other, as an ever-present colonialism that continues unfolding in sites of encounter between colonizers and colonized in the present. Hence, in the first case we can speak of an “after”; not so in the second, in which the colonial encounter is an “always.” In this study, the term is generally meant in the first sense, but without detracting from the importance of the second as an historical through line in the Sibundoy Valley and other sites of contemporary colonialism.

of their identities and traditions under the semantic overlay of the dominant colonial culture. By tracing historical processes of Indigenous transculturation in the valley, from the prehispanic period through nearly 300 years of Spanish colonialism and 70 years of Capuchin indoctrination, I demonstrate how the native cultures of the valley have effectively negotiated the transcultural experience and reproduced themselves to the present.

Before broaching an analysis of Indigenous transculturation in the Sibundoy Valley, it is necessary to briefly contextualize the area of study, its cultures, and its history. The following section provides a geographic, ethnographic, and historical profile of the Sibundoy Valley. I then review the historical, ethnographic, and theoretical literature on which this study is based. My analysis follows the literature review.

Geographic, Ethnographic, and Historical Context

The Sibundoy Valley is a small basin situated at an elevation of 2,200 meters on the Andes-Amazon piedmont of southwest Colombia. To its west, over the cold rim of the Andes and beyond the volcanic La Cocha Lagoon, lies the city of Pasto in the Andean highlands; to the valley's east, in the foothills of the Colombian Massif, sits the city of Mocoa in the Amazonian lowlands, capital of Putumayo Department, of which the Sibundoy Valley constitutes the uppermost region. From the slopes overlooking the valley spring the headwaters of the Putumayo River, which streams down the piedmont into the lowlands, flowing for 1,800 kilometers before joining the Amazon River in the heart of the rainforest of Brazil. The ecology of the valley is essentially Andean, although proximity and a history of intercultural exchange across the piedmont has brought several Amazonian plant species into cultivation in the Sibundoy Valley. Until the late twentieth century, the valley floor was marshy and subject to occasional floods, but land reclamation projects undertaken throughout the twentieth century by the Capuchins and their successors have transformed the former

wetland into agricultural fields and pastureland for cattle (Bonilla, 1968; Cabildo de Indígenas, 1989).

The prehispanic history of the valley remains murky for lack of written records, but it is known that for millennia the valley has been the site of encounters between Indigenous groups from across the Andes-Amazon piedmont and beyond. As a crossroads between the highlands to the west and the lowlands to the east, the Sibundoy Valley was a central link in the routes of trade and mobility that have crisscrossed the region from time immemorial. Ethnographic and historical evidence suggests that the Indigenous groups of the valley were themselves vital actors and intermediaries in these routes, routinely traveling long distances and engaging with numerous and diverse other groups (Bonilla, 1968; Cipolletti, 1988; Dueñas et al., 2016; Gómez, 2006; McDowell, 1989, 1992, 1994; Ramírez, 1996; Ramírez & Castaño, 1992; Taussig, 1987).

Two distinct Indigenous communities have resided in the valley since prehispanic times: the Kamëntšá or Kamsá,³ who speak a language isolate possibly related to the extinct languages of the prehispanic Quillasinga federation (McDowell, 1992, p. 96; 1994, p. 10; Ramírez & Castaño, 1992, p. 292); and the Inga or Inganos, speakers of the northernmost extant dialect of Quechua, the language of the Inka Empire.⁴ It is generally accepted that the Kamëntšá constitute the original inhabitants of the Sibundoy Valley, while the Inga are probably the descendants of Quechua-speaking groups that migrated into the valley from the Amazonian lowlands to the east, although some also ascribe lowland origins to the Kamëntšá (Bolaños, 2017; Bonilla, 1968; Cabildo de Indígenas, 1989; Gómez, 2006; McDowell, 1989, 1992; Ramírez, 1996; Ramírez & Castaño, 1992; Seijas, 1969). The San Pedro River, which

³ Other spellings and names for this group include: Kamëntsá, Camsá, Camëntsá, Coche, and Sibundoy, among others; the latter two are frequent in early literature but are now considered pejorative and antiquated.

⁴ Specifically, the Inga of the Sibundoy Valley speak Highland Inga, distinguished from Jungle Inga as spoken in neighboring lowlands. Even more specifically, Highland Inga varies between Inga communities within the valley; it is not spoken precisely the same in Santiago as in neighboring San Andrés (J. E. Wolf, personal communication, May 9, 2022).

bisects the valley from north to south, is traditionally seen as the boundary marker between the Inga to the west and the Kamëntšá to the east (Chindoy, 2021, p. xv). Although the Inga and Kamëntšá speak different languages and have different origins, centuries of cohabitation in the confined space of the Sibundoy Valley have resulted in an atmosphere of interculturality between the two groups.⁵

The Sibundoy Valley was subject to only occasional visits by Spanish administrators and missionaries throughout the colonial period, beginning with the “discovery” of the valley by lieutenants of the conquistador Sebastián de Benalcázar in 1535, and later the crossing of the valley by the conquistador Hernán Pérez de Quesada in 1542 during his ill-fated search for El Dorado (Bonilla, 1968; Chindoy, 2021; Taussig, 1987). Its geographic isolation, however, allowed it to remain peripheral to the colonial system⁶ and nearly empty of foreign presence until the late republican period.⁷ Apart from the occasional visits of priests from colonial centers such as Pasto and Mocoa, the Sibundoy Valley was by and large left alone until the turn of the twentieth century. Despite its relative isolation, partial Christianization and sporadic contact throughout the colonial period saw the development of a syncretic Catholicism and other transcultural processes in the valley, as evidenced by the oral tradition and surviving documents from the colonial era.

⁵ For example, intermarriage between both groups is frequent, and it is not uncommon that members of one community speak, to some degree, the language of the other. Nonetheless, the communities are distinct in other respects.

⁶ In Latin American historiography it is usual to distinguish between the (Spanish) colonial period and the post-independence or republican period. While acknowledging the validity of that distinction as regards high-level government, in this paper I refer to the Colombian state, Catholic Church, and *colono* settlers as colonial agents, bearing in mind that the colonization of the Sibundoy Valley—and numerous other regions of modern-day Colombia that were never effectively under the control of the Spanish Empire—occurred in the post-independence period. The “colonial system” here refers to mainstream Colombian society, with its Spanish-speaking, Catholic, Eurocentric, and racially *mestizo* and *criollo* connotations. In effect, the post-independence period saw a pivot from external to internal colonialism.

⁷ Although there was no sustained foreign presence in the valley until the twentieth century, it was nonetheless part of the *encomienda* system from an early date: “The *Archivo General de Indias de Sevilla* says that on November 25, 1570, there were 1,371 ‘tributary Indians’ in Sibundoy, suggesting that Spaniards frequently traveled to Sibundoy to collect tributes but did not remain there” (Chindoy, 2021, p. 4). Apart from the sporadic rounds of colonial officials, the only foreigners to visit the valley were missionaries of the short-lived pre-Capuchin missions, and the occasional priest from Pasto or Mocoa (Bonilla, 1968).

The isolation of the Sibundoy Valley ended with the advent of the Capuchins. In the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth century, the Capuchin Order became the last of the missionary orders to establish themselves in the Sibundoy Valley, doing so with much greater success and longevity than their predecessors. The first Capuchin missionaries to work in the Sibundoy Valley arrived in 1899, having been granted by decree governing powers over the frontier territories of the Putumayo and Caquetá, and in 1904 the Apostolic Prefecture of the Caquetá and Putumayo was formally established, cementing Capuchin authority in the Amazonian frontier (Restrepo, 2006). Called by some a “state within a state” (Bonilla, 1968), the mission had its headquarters in the Sibundoy Valley, from whose commanding heights the Capuchins could look down upon the vast Amazonian lowlands that were on paper—if not always in practice—under their jurisdiction.

Having been delegated governing powers by a state that was itself largely absent, the Capuchins quickly established themselves as the political authorities on the Putumayo frontier. The long rule of the Capuchins initiated a process of colonization that saw the rapid dispossession of Indigenous lands by the mission, an influx of non-Indigenous settlers (*colonos*)⁸ from other regions of Colombia, and systematic efforts on the part of the Capuchins to deculturate⁹ the Indigenous inhabitants of the valley while encouraging assimilation to the forcibly imposed and mutually reinforcing cultural systems of orthodox Catholicism and Colombian national identity. The first step taken by the Capuchins in establishing their new mission was to build a network of schools and churches. In the mission schools, Indigenous children would learn to speak Spanish, while speaking Indigenous

⁸ Colonos are frequently referred to as “whites” (*blancos*) in the literature, but as Seijas points out, skin color is not a reliable indicator of ethnicity, and most “whites” in the Sibundoy Valley were mestizos (1969, p. 14).

⁹ *Deculturation*, meaning the process of cultural loss and degradation associated with colonialism and its efforts to strip Indigenous people of their cultures, customs, and languages, is commonly contrasted in the anthropological literature with *acculturation*, meaning the acquisition of a new culture—for example, one imposed by colonialism. *Transculturation*, as I use the term in this paper, highlights the synthetic and creative aspect of intercultural contact, emphasizing that while there may be processes of loss and gain, “the loss is partial and the gain is of new cultural phenomena” (Millington, 2007, p. 263).

languages was strictly forbidden and harshly punished; to sing the national anthem; to dress and behave like their white and mestizo classmates; and to identify as Colombian before Indigenous (Bonilla, 1968; Gómez, 2005; Sandoval Zapata & Lasso Otaya, 2014; Triana, 1950). Meanwhile, a series of roads commissioned by the Colombian state, supervised in their construction by the Capuchins, and built by Indigenous forced labor connected the Sibundoy Valley to mainstream Colombian society for the first time, opening the valley to large-scale settlement by colonos, who soon outnumbered the Indigenous population (Bonilla, 1968; Gómez, 2011; Smith, 1957; Uribe, 2011, 2019). By the time of the mission's decline, most Indigenous families had been displaced from the most productive lands of the central valley to the less fertile slopes of the valley's periphery, leaving their former holdings in the hands of the mission and the colonos who now outnumbered them. The Capuchins maintained their grip on power until 1969, after which the Capuchins were forced to withdraw by a combination of popular and state opposition¹⁰ (Bonilla, 1968; Cabildo de Indígenas, 1989; Gómez, 2005, 2011; Restrepo, 2006; Sandoval Zapata & Lasso Otaya, 2014; Uribe, 2011, 2019). Since then, the Indigenous communities have made significant gains in securing legal protections and the reclamation of stolen land, although much remains to be done ("Termina una disputa," 2016).

Despite the repression of the Capuchin period, and nearly 400 years of intermittent colonial rule before it, the Indigenous cultures of the Sibundoy Valley have long succeeded in meeting the challenges of transculturation by incorporating cultural elements imposed by colonialism while preserving and rearticulating elements of their own. An understanding of the ways in which Indigenous cultures have been rearticulated and reproduced through the history of the valley—and in other colonial situations in general—depends on a robust

¹⁰ The end of the mission came amid mounting opposition following the publication of Víctor Daniel Bonilla's polemical history of the mission, *Siervos de dios y amos de indios* (1968), as well as opposition within the Church, informed by liberation theology, "against the social conservatism of institutional Catholicism" (De Roux, 1992, p. 278).

analysis of ethnohistorical sources and theoretical literature.¹¹ I now turn to a review of the historical, ethnographic, and theoretical literature on which this study is based as way of preface to such an analysis.

Literature Review

Historical and Ethnographic Literature

Historical writing on the Sibundoy Valley is scarce prior to the advent of the Capuchins in the early twentieth century. For the first several decades of the mission, most writing on the valley was produced by the missionaries themselves and by travelers and state officials who were complicit in the missionaries' project. Despite the clear biases and agendas informing the written production of colonial agents in this initial period, these texts are of interest to ethnohistorians of the Sibundoy Valley for the data they provide on conditions in the early mission. Escandón (1913) collates various government documents on the mission, while the unattributed *Informes sobre las Misiones del Putumayo* (1916) anthologizes early publications of state and mission officials. Lengthier reports about the activities and travels of individual missionaries are compiled in Recalde (2002). The reports of traveling officials such as Triana (1950) also provide insight into conditions in the nascent Capuchin mission.

The first scholarly writing on the Sibundoy Valley was authored by government archaeologists and ethnographers of the National Archaeological Service, founded in 1938, and the National Ethnological Institute, founded in 1941. Scholarly work of this period produced several ethnographic studies, still limited in depth and objectivity, of Sibundoy

¹¹ In more than 50 years since the dissolution of the Capuchin mission, the Sibundoy Valley has continued to undergo processes of transculturation and incorporation into the ambit of the Colombian nation-state (Cabildo de Indígenas, 1989). Despite the challenges posed by state expansion, narcotrafficking, extractivism, and development projects that threaten Indigenous sovereignty on multiple fronts, the Indigenous communities of the valley remain resilient in upholding their cultural integrity while continuing to adjust to the challenges of modernity and globalization. I would assert that an understanding of present conditions and future directions in the valley depends on an understanding of local history and the continuities expressed in the contemporary situation there.

Valley natives, while their authors acquired cultural artifacts for display at the newly founded Ethnographic Museum in Bogotá (Chaves, 1945; Friede, 1945; Maldonado, n.d.). Chaves, notably, was the first to critically reflect on the problematic of colono settlement and its effects on Indigenous communities in the piedmont and on the rapidly expanding frontier, a primary catalyst of transculturation in the region.

Since the 1968 publication of Víctor Daniel Bonilla's seminal history of the Sibundoy Valley, *Siervos de dios y amos de indios*, secondary historical scholarship on the valley has proliferated, especially in the vein of ethnohistory. Gómez, the most prolific historian of the valley, has produced studies of Inga ethnohistory (2006); Capuchin colonization and mechanisms of domination (2005); nation-building, settlement, and extractivism in relation to Indigenous groups (2011); and settler colonialism and urbanization of the piedmont and Amazonian frontier (2015). Restrepo (2006) provides an historical overview and analysis of state-Church relations in southern Colombia, particularly in the Sibundoy Valley, suggesting that the Church was empowered by the state to act as its surrogate in the "joint construction" of national identity in the missions of southern Colombia, a perspective upheld by De Roux (1992) in his overview of the broader national context of state-Church relations. Bolaños (2017), though biased and ahistorical in his apologetic assessment of the missionaries as promoting the survival of Indigenous languages, highlights the importance of mission schools to the Capuchin colonial project, a point more thoroughly elaborated by Sandoval Zapata and Lasso Otaya (2014), who also analyze Indigenous resistance, basing their interpretive approach on the theoretical framework of Dussel (1995) and employing his concept of "concealment" to describe Indigenous adaptations to the cultural impositions of the Capuchins. Uribe (2011, 2019), drawing on the primary state and Church documents enumerated above, emphasizes road development as a central strategy for the colonization of the piedmont and as one of the primary goals of the Capuchins in their efforts to connect the

Sibundoy Valley with urban centers such as Pasto to the west and Mocoa to the east. A contemporary report on the colonization of the Putumayo frontier (Smith, 1957) corroborates Uribe's argument that road development was a primary mechanism of the colonial process, a thesis also developed by Gómez (2005, 2011, 2015).

Mongua Calderón (2020) provides a historical overview of processes of national incorporation and extractivism in the broader Amazonian frontier in the nineteenth century, disputing the dominant interpretation of nineteenth-century Amazonia as a space of isolation and marginality. Ramírez (1996) argues similarly in sketching the *longue durée* history of intercultural contact, mobility, and territorial formations in the Sibundoy Valley and across the piedmont, from prehispanic times through to recent history, “[departing] from the hypothesis that the inhabitants of the Sibundoy Valley have been specialized merchants and intermediaries between the Andes and the jungle since the prehispanic era.”¹² This thesis is further developed by Gómez (2006), McDowell (1989, 1994), Taussig (1987), and extended in Ramírez and Castaño (1992). Historical ethnobotanical studies of lowland plant trade also support the view of Sibundoy Valley natives as longtime traders and intermediaries between the Andes and the Amazon (Cipolletti, 1988; Dueñas et al., 2016), which in the view of McDowell explains the presence of both Andean and Amazonian substrata in the domains of religion and mythology, suggesting that syncretic and transcultural processes in the valley long predate the colonial encounter. Ramírez and Castaño (1992) extend this point to argue that Sibundoy Valley natives' historical experience with intercultural contact and syncretism¹³ in prehispanic times can be interpreted as a “strategy for cultural survival”

¹² All direct translations from Spanish-language sources are mine.

¹³ Syncretism is related to but not synonymous with transculturation. Allatson (2007) defines syncretism: “A term that arose in comparative religious studies, and that has been taken up in anthropological discourse, as well as in performance and other branches of cultural studies, syncretism connotes the binding together and intermingling of distinct religious or cultural practices” (p. 220).

which enabled the rearticulation of Indigenous cultures following the colonial encounter—an argument central to my own thesis.

Within the ethnographic corpus, scholarship on Indigenous cultural change and heterogeneity focuses on Catholic syncretism in the domains of religion and myth. Friede (1945) transcribes a prevalent native legend dating to the Spanish colonial period, that of “Our Lord of Sibundoy,” which he and others (Bonilla, 1968; Chindoy, 2020; Juajibioy, 1987, 1989) take as the first instance of Catholic syncretism in the post-conquest history of the valley. McDowell (1989, 1992, 1994) emphasizes Indigenous continuities and processes of accommodation within syncretic religious systems and mythological traditions, while Ramírez and Castaño (1992) focus on similar processes of syncretic mediation specifically within the shamanic tradition. Examples and discussion of syncretism in the realms of religion and shamanism is also found in the ethnobotanical work of Schultes (1988; Schultes & Raffauf, 1992) and Bristol (1965), as well as in the ethnomedical work of Seijas (1969).

Several studies focus also on symbolic and religious syncretism within the Indigenous carnival Bëtsknaté, or the *Carnaval del Perdón*, the most important Indigenous festivity of the valley. Castaño (2021) provides photographs, with explanatory notes, of syncretic symbols in the proceedings of the carnival; Quiñones Triana (2019) and Tobar and Gómez (2004) provide more in-depth studies of Bëtsknaté, discussing its history and evolution, including Capuchin attempts to suppress it, while Sandoval Zapata and Lasso Otaya (2014) identify the “concealment” of Indigenous elements in the superficially Catholic elements of the festival, interpreting this as coded resistance. McDowell (1992) discusses the revalorization of the Inga carnival Calusturinda within the context of other cultural preservation efforts, including the bilingualization of education and involvement in national pan-Indigenous movements; he concludes that during the carnival, “the ancestors appear to walk the earth once again, and the modern people renew their contract with the ancestral

model” (p. 110), suggesting the importance of this festival for Indigenous cultural reproduction. Aldana Barahona and Sánchez Carballo (2021) interpret the Inga *chumbe*, a type of cloth belt woven with traditional pictographic designs and wrapped around the body, in a similar vein, interpreting the *chumbe* as a synthesis of the traditional and the modern, and as, therefore, a metaphorical and visual representation of the transcultural experience.

Jacanamijoy (2014) argues, similarly, that *chumbe* pictographs can be read as texts that, when correctly read, spell out the history of the Inga.

A considerable volume of ethnobotanical work—ethnobotany being one of the primary cultural domains in which transcultural processes are evident—has been conducted in the Sibundoy Valley. Schultes (1988; Schultes & Hofmann, 1992; Schultes & Raffauf, 1990, 1992) was the first and most prolific ethnobotanist to work in the valley; his documentation of native plant use is inseparable from his observations of Indigenous religion and syncretism. His student Bristol (1964, 1965, 1966, 1969) produced work in a similar vein, corroborating Schultes’ work while contributing new observations of his own. Seijas’s ethnomedical study of the Kamëntšá (1969) also includes ethnobotanical observations as they relate to shamanism and the etiological categories of native medicine, which evince both Andean-Amazonian origins and a syncretic Catholic overlay.

Finally, there exists an important body of Indigenous scholarship on the Sibundoy Valley. In 1989, the Kamëntšá *cabildo*, or Indigenous government council, produced a survey of demographic, sociocultural, economic, and political transformations of recent decades, diagnosing the causes of problems confronting the community, and suggesting alternatives of Indigenous autonomy (Comunidad Kamëntšá, 1989); this text elucidates Indigenous perspectives on cultural transformations in the valley. Chindoy (2020) seeks to produce a decolonial philosophy of his native Kamëntšá culture, providing an Indigenous critique of some of the same scholars I have cited here. Jacanamijoy (2014) writes on the Inga *chumbe*

as a storytelling device, while Juajibioy (1987, 1989) compiles and comments on the oral literature of the valley. This tradition of Indigenous scholarship—in some cases, of autoethnography, which Pratt (1991) suggests is itself a form of discourse related to transculturation (p. 36)—from the valley suggests the viability of the rearticulation of the authors' cultures in academic spaces.

While much scholarship, both Indigenous and otherwise, has been produced on the history and ethnography of the Sibundoy Valley, careful review of the literature reveals a tendency among scholars addressing cultural themes to overstate the degree of deculturation experienced by—and to understate or underestimate the creative and adaptive strategies of—the Indigenous communities of the valley. This study emphasizes the creative and adaptive aspects of the transcultural experience, in which the natives of the Sibundoy Valley—confronted with the transculturating influence of the Capuchin mission, Catholicism, the Colombian state, and colono settlers—selectively adapted, and in other cases resisted, foreign cultural elements as a strategy of defending and rearticulating their Indigenous identities.

Theoretical Literature

In interpreting processes of transculturation in Sibundoy Valley ethnohistory, I draw on several key scholars and theoretical traditions. First, however, a brief discussion of the term *transculturation* itself is necessary. The term was first introduced by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in his 1940 book *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*¹⁴ “as an act of resistance... to the then emergent hegemony of US ethnography and its deployment of the term acculturation, which Ortiz felt to be inadequate on technical grounds” (Millington, 2007, p. 260). As commonly employed, the term acculturation implies the total replacement of one culture by another—for example, the assimilation of Indigenous groups to

¹⁴ Republished in Harriet de Onís's 1947 translation by Duke University Press in 1995 as *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, with original introduction by Bronislaw Malinowski.

a colonially imposed culture in a move entailing the loss of the former's language and cultural identity. Ortiz, however, "[u]nhappy with the unidirectional connotations of the term acculturation... proposed a schema of three contrapuntal processes: *acculturation* or cultural acquisition; *deculturation*, or partial cultural destruction, uprooting, and loss; and *neoculturation* or the emergence of 'new cultural phenomena'" (Allatson, 2007, p. 229). Ortiz had his native Cuba in mind when introducing the term, as the unidirectionality of cultural change implied by acculturation could not account for the heterogeneity of Cuban identity and history—products of cultural fusion between European, African, Amerindian, and Asian elements. The applicability of Ortiz's theory to other situations of colonial contact and cultural transformation, however, would eventually cause it to circulate among scholars interested in describing such processes as they occurred in other contexts.

Although the prominent anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski signaled his approval of Ortiz's new term in the introduction he wrote for the first edition of *Contrapunteo cubano*, it failed to acquire currency in anthropological discourse until its reevaluation decades later. In the meantime, however, the term was adapted by Latin American literary critics, for whom it came to describe the articulation of Latin American identity and history through literature (p. 230). Their basic use of the term, however, reflects its anthropological origins. Spitta (1995) provides a robust definition of transculturation, writing:

On one side is acculturation, the sheer and irredeemable loss of one's culture, language, history, tradition—even the body and its rhythms; on the other side is transculturation, the overcoming of loss by giving new shape to one's life and culture after the catastrophes of Conquest, colonization, and modernization. Transculturation can thus be understood as the complex process of adjustment and re-creation—cultural, literary, linguistic, and personal—that allows for new, vital, and viable

configurations to arise out of the clash of cultures and the violence of colonial and neocolonial appropriations. (pp. 1-2)

Pratt (1991), reconciling the definitions of transculturation articulated by both anthropologists and literary critics, contributed a new term that has since produced a minor literature of its own: the contact zone. Pratt employs this term

to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today. (p. 34)

She goes on to effect a synthesis of both terms:

Ethnographers have used the term *transculturation* to describe processes whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture. ... While subordinate peoples do not usually control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what gets absorbed into their own and what it gets used for.

Transculturation, like autoethnography, is a phenomenon of the contact zone. (p. 36)

What both Spitta and Pratt's glosses on the term emphasize is the creative aspect of transculturation—what Ortiz himself termed neoculturation, the third term in his three-stage theory of transculturation—as a mode by which subordinated groups adapt, accommodate, and instrumentalize the impositions of a dominant culture in order to rearticulate and reproduce their own culture under new conditions. It is with this creative and adaptive element in mind that the term is employed here, in the case of the Sibundoy Valley.

Other theorists relevant to an interpretation of cultural transformation, especially in situations of colonialism in the Latin America, include those of decolonial studies and the philosophy of liberation. Foucault (1982), from which these authors take cues, discusses power relations and the creation of subjects in general terms, while Quijano (2000) introduces

the notion of “the colonality of power” to describe the evolution and operation of colonialism in the Latin American context. Dussel (1995) elaborates similar themes in his critique of the Eurocentric logics of the Enlightenment colonialism in the Americas, while his concept of “concealment” (*encubrimiento*) informs the work of Sandoval Zapata and Lasso Otaña (2014) on Indigenous resistance in the Sibundoy Valley. Varese’s (1996) work also bears similarities to Dussel’s; his claim that “[t]he Indian was, of course, invented by European colonialism” (p. 58) recalls both Dussel’s claim that America itself was invented by European colonialism, and Said’s (1993) more general thesis that Europeans came to define themselves and Western culture in opposition to the “Other” cultures they encountered and colonized. These theorists’ reflections on the nature of colonialism underpin my interpretation of the colonial logics at work in the Sibundoy Valley, which partly determined the conditions under which transculturation occurred there.

Much of the theoretical literature concerning transculturation also discusses cultural resistance, being that transculturation is sometimes conceptualized as a form of resistance. Scott (1985) develops the notion of “weapons of the weak,” forms of everyday resistance which he characterizes as “the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth” (p. 29), resistant strategies which in some cases can be located within the Sibundoy Valley. Said (1993) also discusses cultural resistance, particularly in the realms of literature and discourse—what he terms “writing back.”¹⁵ Both analyses relate to the forms of resistance described by Millington (2007) and Pratt (1991) in their studies of transculturation and contact zones, respectively. While this study makes no attempt to intervene in the discussion around the direct relationship between transculturation and

¹⁵ The Kamëntšá poet Hugo Jamioy Juagibioy is a good example of a writer who, in “writing back,” contributes to what Said would identify as a literature of cultural resistance.

resistance, the phenomena and strategies of resistance explored by these scholars are nevertheless applicable to an interpretation of cultural transformation in the Sibundoy Valley.

The theoretical literature I have synthesized here allows for a reading of transculturation in Sibundoy Valley ethnohistory as a form of creative adaptation, accommodation, and coexistence. The Indigenous peoples of the valley, marginalized and subordinated within the colonial system, could not maintain their cultures completely unaltered under the transformative pressures exerted by colonialism. What was within their power, however, was to selectively incorporate elements of the foreign, colonially imposed culture—that of Catholicism, the Spanish language, and Colombian national identity—alongside, but not over, their native cultures. In this respect, the Sibundoy Valley is an excellent case study for transculturation within concrete historical and cultural circumstances—the type of locally grounded conditions to which Ortiz’s notion is best applied (Millington, 2007, p. 268). It is to that discussion that I now turn.

Analysis

Deep Transculturation: Before the Encounter

Before broaching a discussion of Indigenous transculturation in its most significant phase, that is, in the Capuchin mission of the twentieth century, it is important to understand the deep historical undercurrents at work in the valley and its broader geographical context. The Capuchins—and their predecessors, a long line of aspirant missionaries and fanatical conquistadors—stepped into a dynamic world in which there already existed a long history of intercultural contact and exchange. In order to understand how the Indigenous communities of the valley were able to maintain core elements of their cultures and identities under the deculturating influence of the Capuchins and other colonial agents, we must briefly sketch the history what I will call *deep* transculturation, understood as the historical undercurrent of

transculturality that, leaving its mark on the Indigenous peoples of the valley, came to define Indigenous cultural survival strategies throughout the colonial period and to the present.

The Putumayo in its broad extent has been a frontier zone, crossroads, and site of cultural confluence and exchange for millennia due to its situation between the Andes and the Amazon, two quite distinct spheres of South American Indigenous culture (Gómez, 2006). The Sibundoy Valley, given its central position in the Putumayo piedmont, is a special case. As Ramírez (1996) has documented, the history of intercultural contact in the Sibundoy Valley and the broader Andean-Amazonian piedmont extends back into time far beyond the event horizon of conquest and colonialism. This is indicated, in the first place, by the lowland origins of the Inga of the valley, who still essentially resemble in language and culture their lowland cousins in the departments of Putumayo, Caquetá, and Nariño, as well as neighboring Ecuador and Peru.¹⁶ The Inga, significantly, have long maintained a tradition of traveling as traders, today ranging across Colombia and as far afield as Venezuela and Ecuador (Gómez, 2006; Ramírez, 1996; Ramírez & Castaño, 1992; Taussig, 1987). This ancient practice brought the Inga into contact with myriad groups quite different in terms of culture and lifeways. Ramírez and Castaño (1992) suggest that this early, pre-conquest experience with intercultural contact inscribed itself in the structures of Sibundoy native culture and thought, positing that

[The] Sibundoy strategy for cultural survival consists of integrating foreign elements without denying their own beliefs by establishing mediations that match native

¹⁶ Highland Inga is the variant of Inga Kichwa spoken in the Sibundoy Valley. It is mutually intelligible with Jungle Inga, as spoken in the neighboring Amazonian lowlands, where most ethnohistorians posit the Inga of the valley migrated from. Inga forms part of a broader dialect continuum extending throughout the Northwest Amazon and Andean piedmont, suggesting a long history of migration and diffusion across an extensive geographical area (Gómez, 2006). McDowell (1989) writes that “[The] Inganos of the Lower Putumayo are known by the Kamsá and Ingano alike as amigos, and they are perceived as a friendly extension of the native communities of the Putumayo highlands” (p. 9).

thought structure, which is based on a movement of complementary opposites. (p. 287)

The result of this process of mediation is that both traditions are accommodated within a single cultural domain—one that is now, through this movement, made transcultural. This is the basic mechanism by which deep transculturation long took place in the Sibundoy Valley and its environs. Proof of that is in the many vestiges of transcultural experiences that predate the colonial period in numerous cultural domains—namely shamanism, mythology, and ethnobotany, to name a few. Ramírez and Castaño continue, describing this “strategy for cultural survival” as it operates within the shamanic sphere:

As traders since precolumbian times, Sibundoy shamans have incorporated different cultural codes and elements from other groups into their own shamanic structure. ...

This dynamic allows them to resist potentially disruptive influences. (p. 287)

The syncretic nature of Sibundoy Valley shamanism is well evidenced in the ethnographic record. McDowell (1989, 1992, 1994) has noted the convergence of both Andean and Amazonian strata and symbolism within the domains of religion and folklore, both of which are central to the shamanic tradition in the valley. McDowell (1989) defines Sibundoy Valley folk religion as “a nexus of popular religiosity defined by three major strands: a pan-Andean cosmological bedrock, a tropical forest ecstatic shamanism, and an overlay of folk and doctrinal Catholicism imposed by the missionaries” (p. 174). Prior to the Christianization of the valley, the first two strata—Andean cosmology and tropical forest shamanism—defined the character of religious life in the Sibundoy Valley. Typical Andean cosmological elements include the culture hero Wangestmuna, according to McDowell (1992) a figure analogous to the central Andean Viracocha, at once both hero and deity (p. 100); anthropomorphic solar and lunar deities (1989, p. 182); and *huaca* earth shrines, sites of spiritual power (p. 183). Amazonian elements, on the other hand, include the “ecstatic” shamanic tradition itself,

replete with practices and beliefs typical of Upper Amazonian spirituality (p. 185). McDowell concludes that “[t]he presence of tropical forest elements in the Sibundoy folk religion is a product of the intimate association of the Sibundoy native peoples with the lowland margins of the Andes” (p. 186). McDowell’s analysis makes clear the historical depth of transculturation within the Sibundoy Valley as a process of incorporation and mediation between distinct Andean and Amazonian cultural elements. This process as it occurred in the prehispanic period would continue into the colonial period, serving to incorporate colonial cultural elements much as it had foreign cultural elements of Indigenous origin—that is, allowing the Indigenous cultures “to resist potentially disruptive influences.”

The Sibundoy Valley has long been a vital crossroads in the ancestral trading routes that crisscross the whole piedmont and beyond, extending far into the jungle to one side and beyond the western slopes of the Andes to the other. The ethnobotanical record, like the syncretism evident in the shamanic domain, also indicates the historical depth of Indigenous intercultural contact and borrowing between Andes and Amazon. The most significant single example is the hallucinogenic vine *yagé*¹⁷, whose widespread ceremonial and medicinal use by both Inga and Kamëntšá shamans evinces a lowland origin—and, indeed, the vine is still today imported from the adjoining lowlands of the Middle and Low Putumayo, as it does not grow well at the elevation of the Sibundoy Valley (Bristol, 1965, 1966; Jacanamijoy, 2014; Schultes, 1988; Schultes & Hofmann, 1992; Schultes & Raffauf, 1990, 1992; Seijas, 1969).¹⁸ The importance of *yagé* itself as both a product and cause of intercultural mediation between Andes and Amazon should not be understated. In its capacity as a “civilizing agent,” a quality

¹⁷ *Banisteriopsis caapi*, more widely known as *ayahuasca* (Quechua: “vine of the soul”), or *ambi waska* in Inga (McDowell, personal communication, April 11, 2022) and *biaxi* in Kamëntšá (Bristol, 1966, p. 120), although both groups also employ the generic “*yagé*.” The use of *yagé* in Indigenous curing, diagnostic, and divination ceremonies is widely documented among the Indigenous groups of the Colombian Amazon, but the *taitas*—shamans and medicine men—of the Sibundoy Valley, where the vine is not cultivated, are unique for importing it from the jungle lowlands. For a detailed description of the ethnobotany of *yagé* in the Sibundoy Valley, see Bristol, 1966. Seijas (1969) discusses *yagé* in its ethnomedical context.

¹⁸ Despite non-optimal growing conditions, some in the valley do (or did) cultivate *yagé* (Bristol, 1966).

ascribed to it in the mythic corpus of the Sibundoy Valley (Ramírez & Castaño, 1992, pp. 295-96), yagé facilitated peaceable contact and exchange between the diverse groups involved in its trade. The lowland natives from whom Sibundoy Valley shamans procured the brew had the reputation of being both dangerous “savages” and powerful sorcerers (McDowell, 1989, p. 118; Taussig, 1987, p. 153).¹⁹ However, in the context of the intercultural yagé ceremonies to which groups from across the piedmont were invited to partake, all were momentarily equals, their temporary union—physical and spiritual—mediated by the intoxicating brew.

Historical ethnobotanical studies also indicate that the natives of the valley were both mediators of and participants in the prehispanic and early colonial *curare*²⁰ trade, engaging with groups as diverse as the Tikuna of the deepest Colombian Amazon and the Quillasingas of neighboring Pasto (Cipolletti, 1988, p. 534). The Amazonian plant *I. guayusa*, imported from the lowlands south of Mocoa, has also been reported in the ethnobotany of the Inga of the valley, indicating another historical trade complex (Dueñas et al., 2016, p. 89). On the other hand, the use of native plants (i.e., endemic to the Sibundoy Valley) in the ethnobotany of the valley is extensive, and some cultivars are known to exist there and nowhere else, including several varieties of the hallucinogenic genus *Datura*, indicating a history of intensive cultivation (Bristol, 1969, pp. 166, 170).²¹ Indeed, as Bristol notes, “[m]ore

¹⁹ A term that frequently appears in the literature on intercultural contact across the piedmont is *auca* (Quechua: “savage”). Its use by the Indigenous people of the Sibundoy Valley, as well as depictions in their mythic corpus of lowland peoples as culturally backward and uncouth, reflects a prejudice towards lowlanders common among highland peoples across the Andes.

²⁰ Curare is the common name for various plant-based alkaloid arrow poisons used for hunting and occasionally warfare across much of the Amazon basin. Cipolletti (1988) points out that the preparation of curare depends on cultural factors (i.e., knowledge of its preparation and use), not the local presence of poisonous plants (p. 528), possibly supporting the notion of Sibundoy Valley natives as intermediaries in the trade of a valuable commodity whose preparation by the lowland groups who produced it was kept as something of a trade secret.

²¹ After yagé, *Datura* (locally known in Spanish as *borrachera*, meaning simply “inebriant”) is perhaps the most important psychotropic in the ethnobotany of the valley. There seems to be some ambiguity concerning its use, however; Bristol (1969) writes that “Yepes, Schultes and Theilkuhl use the words divination, prophecy, diagnosis and witchcraft in describing the psychotropic use of *Datura*, yet no Sibundoy I encountered stated such reasons for using any *Datura* drug. Nor has Haydée Seijas found these usages during more than one year of investigating Sibundoy ethnomedicine” (p. 191). According to Bristol, uses include: as a treatment for

variation in *Datura candida* is found in the Valley of Sibundoy than is known at any other locality” (p. 181). There are indications that at least one variety of *Datura* was acquired through contact with other groups, namely the cultivar *Andaquí borrachera*, whose name suggests contact with the Andaquí people to the northeast, at the head of the Magdalena Valley (p. 223). Additionally, it appears that just as groups from across the piedmont region would frequently gather to consume yagé together, so would such delegations make visits to the Sibundoy Valley to partake in the *Datura* ceremonies of the Inga and Kamëntšá:

If the lowland doctors are skilled in the preparation of yagé, the Sibundoy native doctors are respected for their expertise in the handling of *borrachera*. Not only Inga amigos, but also members of the far-flung Siona, Huitoto, Kofan and Kwakier indigenous groups come to the Sibundoy Valley in search of this powerful remedy, participating in what one informant called “an exchange of medicines.” (McDowell, 1989, p. 137)

McDowell is here referring to a contemporary practice, but it is reasonable to suppose that these gatherings have taken place for as long as the yagé gatherings of a similar nature, a supposition supported by the apparent antiquity of *Datura* cultivation in the Sibundoy Valley. If this supposition is correct, it would indicate yet another instance of intercultural exchange in the ethnobotany of the valley. In any case, the ethnobotanical literature abundantly demonstrates that although the ecology of the valley is Andean, some of the plants most important to and widely used in both popular medicine and the shamanic tradition were (and still are) sourced from the lowlands and from other native groups—not to mention that the shamanic tradition itself is of the same origin. Clearly the ethnobotanical domain evinces the

rheumatism, a pesticide, a hunting aid for dogs, a vermifuge, a topical suppurant, an emetic, a carminative, and against colds and erysipelas (pp. 187-89). These are in addition to *Datura*'s powerful hallucinogenic properties.

same history of intercultural contact as is on display in the domains of religion, folklore, and shamanism.

I have summarized the history of deep transculturation in the Sibundoy Valley in order to establish that the transcultural experience was not brought to the valley with the advent of Europeans and their new cultural impositions, but that it long predates their arrival to the Americas. This point bears emphasizing, since it explains in part how the natives of the valley were able to mitigate the deculturating effects of the colonial encounter and to mediate the incorporation of colonially imposed cultural elements into their own schemata according to a deeply ingrained strategy²² that served the same purpose in prehispanic times. What was unique about transculturation as it occurred in the wake of the colonial encounter was the degree of deculturation wrought on the Indigenous communities of the valley by the logics of colonialism. Transculturation in the colonial period proved far more coercive and more hostile to native cultures than any known by Sibundoy Valley natives before. The adaptive strategy inscribed by long historical experience in the cultural fabric of the Sibundoy Valley, which had proved so successful in mediating encounters between Indigenous cultures, was now to be put to the test in a confrontation of a different nature.

The Colonial Encounter

The first Europeans to step foot in the Sibundoy Valley were the conquistador company of Juan de Ampudia and Pedro de Añasco, lieutenants of Sebastián de Belalcázar, one of the key figures in the conquest of Ecuador and Colombia (Bonilla, 1968, p. 14). First contact occurred in June of 1535 under violent circumstances. Bonilla provides a description of the ethnogeographic context in which this first encounter took place:

²² “Strategy” might imply a degree of personal intentionality which I do not mean to impute on the individuals involved in this history. What I mean to stress is the slow unfolding of this adaptive strategy on the macro scale, that is, on the level of culture and society, and of the historical currents that shape cultural transformations in ways undirected by the agency of individual actors. It is on this level that the “strategy for cultural survival” articulated by Ramírez and Castaño (1992) operates.

[At the time of the conquest,] the country of the Sibundoys²³ went beyond the bounds of the valley itself. Its tribes occupied, to the north, the small valleys of Juanambú and Quiña; to the south, the region of La Ensellada; and part of the western *altiplano*, shared with the Abades, Quillacingas, and Pastos tribes. (p. 14)

It was in the *altiplano* that the Spanish scouts under De Ampudia and De Añasco entered the region and began conquering. The conquistadors continued east until De Ampudia encountered the Valley of Sibundoy, where he fought the locals for three weeks before retreating (p. 15). Bonilla provides some idea as to the traumatic mark left by this violent first contact on the inhabitants of the valley:

Among the Sibundoys, this first encounter with civilization left only one memory: that “upon seeing their valley invaded by the whites, many ascended to the heavens upon the smoke rising from a bonfire; the stars were the glint of their eyes.” (p. 15)

After that first encounter, the Sibundoy Valley escaped further contact until, seven years later, the bedraggled expedition of Hernán Pérez de Quesada in search of El Dorado entered the valley from the Putumayo piedmont (p. 15). Referring to the expedition, Taussig (1987) writes:

The jungle-dwelling Indians around the Mocoa river (described by contemporaries as cannibals who ferociously fought off the Spanish) assured Hernán Pérez de Quesada and his 260 companions of conquest that the Golden Land lay close by in the mountains rising to the west in a fabled land called Achibichi, where the Spaniards found the tillers of the Sibundoy Valley but no gold, and beyond that the new Spanish town of Pasto. (p. 142)

²³ Bonilla uses the term “Sibundoy” as an antiquated ethnonym for the Kamëntšá, apparently based on his erroneous belief that the Inga only emerged as a separate group during the colonial period due to the partial Quechuaization of the Kamëntšá by missionaries who employed Quechua as a *lingua franca* and language of indoctrination among Indigenous groups (p. 36). This supposition is not upheld by other ethnohistorians of the valley; the presence of Inga-speaking groups in the Sibundoy Valley long predates the colonial encounter.

In both encounters, the conquistadors noted that the valley appeared populous and prosperous and was already home to sizable settlements bearing names such as Putumayo, Manoy, and Sebundoy (Bonilla, 1968 p. 16). It was not long after these early encounters, consequently, that the first missionaries appeared in the valley, and Christianization began in 1547 under a company of Franciscans. Despite the apparent success of Christianization efforts during the Franciscans' residence in the valley, their missions were transferred to the Dominicans in 1577 by royal provision of the Real Audiencia de Quito. The Dominicans, for their part, retired from the valley after only six years, taking with them on their departure the wooden figure of the Cristo de Sibundoy, which soon passed from memory into myth among the partially Christianized natives of the valley.²⁴ It is in the legend of Nuestro Señor de Sibundoy ("Our Lord of Sibundoy") that developed following the departure of the Dominicans that some scholars have identified the first sign of transculturation of a syncretic Catholic nature in the Sibundoy Valley. This legend warrants analysis as an archetypal and defining example of transculturation in the post-contact period.

Friede (1945) and Juajibioy (1989) provide several versions of the legend that differ little from one another in general outline, although more evidently syncretic elements are present in Juajibioy's version. In both versions, an effigy of Christ appears to the inhabitants of the Sibundoy Valley dressed in Indigenous garments, which Juajibioy describes in vivid terms:

He was wearing a wool *cusma* [native tunic], dyed blue, tied at the waist with an elegant string girdle, and over it a native *ruana* [poncho] with a black background, blue and white stripes, red, blue, and white borders, but no necklaces. That young man of extraordinary beauty was the Lord of Sibundoy. (p. 26)

²⁴ The effigy was brought to the Santo Domingo church in Pasto, where it is still venerated by Sibundoy Valley natives who make pilgrimage to see it (Friede, 1945, p. 316).

The Christ effigy orders that the natives build a chapel in the place of his appearance, saying “I want to live here among you so that you give up your bad customs” (Friede, 1945, p. 316). The people comply, building him a chapel in the place where there now stands a church in the town of Sibundoy, and placing the Christ effigy at the altar. In Juajibioy’s (1989) account,

The temple destined for the celebration of the religious cult of the community was a wooden construction with a roof made of palm leaves from the region. Its structure was bound with special vines, cut under a good moon so that they would last long. (p. 18)

Soon, however, people notice that every morning the Christ effigy appears exhausted and with wet clothes.

When the governor of the cabildo was informed of the nighttime escapes of the effigy that suggested moral sin, he ordered that the effigy be punished with twelve lashes. But Christ, before asking for pardon and promising reform, as the Indians generally do when punished, he left for Pasto and never again returned to Sibundoy. (Friede, 1945, p. 316)

Only later do the natives discover that the Christ effigy had been going out at night to work on the road between Pasto and Mocoa “in order to ensure that the mountain road opened by the conquistadors Juan de Ampudia and Pedro de Añasco, discoverers of Sibundoy in July of 1535, would not disappear” (Juajibioy, 1989, p. 19). Discovering that he was laboring to help them all along, the natives of the valley come to regret their treatment of the Christ effigy.

This legend is interesting on multiple levels. On the first, it is simply the first instance of Catholic syncretism to appear in the post-contact history of the valley. Given that its central character is the Christ effigy brought to the valley by the Franciscan Order in 1547, and which was removed by the Dominicans in 1583, the legend must have its historical roots at an early date in the chronology of the contact period (Juajibioy, 1989, p. 18). Second, it is

noteworthy for the particulars of its syncretic symbolism; clearly Catholicism is already the central influence, an indication of the success of early Christianization, but it is significant that Christ appears in the guise not of a conquistador or priest but wearing the black *cusma* with blue and white stripes and red fringe that is the traditional men's garment in the Sibundoy Valley (Bonilla, 1968, p. 256; Schultes, 1988, p. 24). Additionally, the chapel built for the Christ effigy is architecturally of a syncretic structure, with a Christian function but built from local materials to an Indigenous design. The palm leaves, although of a local species, evince Christian symbolism, an element also evident in the curing rituals of the shamanic domain (Bristol, 1966; Seijas, 1969) and in the carnival of Bëtsknaté (Castaño, 2021). Their appearance in the legend suggests an implicit comparison between the advent of Christ in Sibundoy and the biblical Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, an event celebrated by Christians on Palm Sunday. The reference to the "special vines" used to bind the wooden walls and palm leaf roof—that is, Indigenous elements with Christian ones—is suggestive of a lowland Amazonian influence, as vines and lianas are characteristic of the lowland forests but grow less abundantly in the Andean highlands; additionally, this line possibly makes implicit reference to yagé, which for the people of Sibundoy is a special vine indeed, and which also, as discussed above, has long served a unifying—one could say binding—function among the peoples of the piedmont, one which it could again be called upon to serve in mediating contact between natives and colonizers.²⁵ It would also not be unreasonable to identify a religious significance in the appearance of yagé in a syncretic Catholic context, given the importance of yagé to Indigenous religion in the valley before and

²⁵ Although the missionary fathers, particularly the Capuchins, attempted to suppress the use of yagé, "as they considered it one of the most deeply rooted superstitions of the Putumayo natives, which was of no use to their evangelization nor to their productivity" (Sandoval Zapata & Lasso Otaya, 2014, p. 52), they were unsuccessful in their efforts, and some missionaries, including the apostolic prefect Bartolomé de Igualada, were known to partake in yagé ceremonies, and even to officiate at such ceremonies themselves (Ramírez & Castaño, 1992; Sandoval Zapata & Lasso Otaya, 2014; Taussig, 1987). This is an example of the bidirectionality of transculturation, whereby colonizers were influenced by the cultures they colonized (Millington, 2007; Pratt, 1991; Spitta, 1995).

after contact. Also, that the “special vines” are cut under a “good moon” is a detail suggestive of an Andean symbolic substrate in addition to the Amazonian one, recalling McDowell’s (1989) identification of the significance of moon symbolism in the domains of religion, mythology, and folklore, in which “[t]he phases of the moon mark periods of time that are thought to be auspicious or otherwise for a number of human endeavors” (p. 77). Another interesting instance of symbolic syncretism is the detail recorded in Friede’s (1945) version of the legend, which suggests that Christ first appeared in the form of a bird before, pursued by a hunter, he transformed himself into an effigy (p. 316); this element recalls motifs of animal transformation and anthropomorphic characters in the mythological and folkloric corpus of the valley (Juajibioy, 1987, 1989; McDowell, 1989, 1992, 1994).

Clearly, on a symbolic level the legend of “Our Lord of Sibundoy” is replete with syncretic elements and layered semantic referents of diverse origins. Yet despite the incongruities—Christ in a *cusma*?—the contradictions are only apparent; there is no tension, and the legend is presented and received quite naturally in the traditional performance settings in which it circulates. The apparent ease with which Catholic elements were, at an early date, incorporated into the preexisting religious and symbolic systems of the valley evinces, in the case of this legend, the operation described by Ramírez and Castaño (1992) as a “strategy for cultural survival” which “[establishes] mediations that match native thought structure... based on a movement of complementary opposites” (p. 287). Semantic congruence is established between the complementary opposites in question—Christ in a *cusma*; native and Christian architectural elements; Amazonian and Andean symbolic and religious substrates—and each finds its place within a system that accommodates all, though which does not necessarily privilege all to the same degree.

There is something else interesting about the legend of “Our Lord of Sibundoy,” and that is the allusion to the road that the Christ effigy goes out to work on at night. Juajibioy’s

version identifies the road as the one opened by Juan de Ampudia and Pedro de Añasco in 1535, while Friede identifies it as the road between Pasto and Mocoa constructed under the Capuchins in the twentieth century (1945, p. 318). In any case, the implication is clear: The advent of Christianity in the valley meant that the path of conquest could never be closed.

The identification of Christ with the roads opened by colonizers—the same roads that brought violence, missionaries, tax collectors, and settlers to the valley, whether in the sixteenth century or the twentieth—suggests an awareness, on the part of the natives of the valley, that the colonial encounter marked a change that could not be reversed. We cannot, therefore, fail to miss a fact evident in the type of transculturation exemplified by “Our Lord of Sibundoy” that is not apparent in the prehispanic processes of transculturation examined above: the fact, as already alluded to, that the distinguishing factor between prehispanic and post-contact forms of transculturation in the valley is the degree of deculturation that each implied. There is little evidence to suggest that significant deculturation occurred in instances of transcultural contact in the valley in the prehispanic period, although it is improbable that positive evidence for it could be identified, given the difficulties of reconstructing cultural processes in the deep past without the aid of written records.²⁶ On the other hand, the advent—one could say invention, following Dussel (1995) and Quijano (2000)—of colonialism in the Americas marked a vast difference in terms of how transculturation occurred, and how it affected Indigenous cultural integrity, following the colonial encounter.

Once reduced to the monolithic and invented category of “Indian” within the rigid hierarchy of a colonial system that positioned Indigenous people as racially, culturally, and religiously—all eventually amounting to *ontologically*—inferior to Europeans, who by

²⁶ One would expect, at the very least, that if some major deculturating process had occurred in the deep past, it would be recorded in the oral literature or mythic corpus of the valley; this does not appear to be the case. In any case, even in situations of imperial subjugation by conquest in the prehispanic period—for example, under the Inka or Mexica empires—the aim of the conquerors was typically the extraction of tribute and the maintenance of social order, not the wholesale acculturation of imperial subjects. There is no prehispanic analogue to colonialism.

contrast positioned themselves as representatives of “civilization” and virtue, the former saw their cultures and lifeways come under sustained attack and repression on the part of the latter (Dussel, 1995; Quijano, 2000; Varese, 1996). In the Sibundoy Valley, the devalorization of Indigenous cultures that accompanied the colonial encounter, even in the absence of a sustained foreign presence in the valley itself—although to a reduced extent then as compared to later periods—was expressed in the first place by the subordination of Indigenous religious and symbolic categories to those of Catholicism. To return to “Our Lord of Sibundoy,” this is perhaps what is most salient about the legend: that so soon after contact and after only a few decades of Christianization, colonially imposed categories came to subsume Indigenous ones; the main subject of the legend is Christ, and its moral is that Christianity—i.e., colonialism—was there to stay.

Bonilla (1968) cites an interesting variant of the legend of “Our Lord of Sibundoy” that he describes as a “Christian reevaluation.” It was recorded in the Capuchin period, sometime after 1930—the end of most transformative phase of the mission:

Before punishing the Lord... the natives of the town of Sibundoy spoke the same language as those of Santiago and San Andrés, which is Quechua; but, as punishment for the sacrilege they committed against his divine personage, he took from them the language of rational men and gave them that of pigs...²⁷ (p. 185)

If we take the earlier versions of the legend as exemplary of a more historically “pure” original that probably has roots in the sixteenth century, this version appears as an essentially twentieth-century corruption resulting from several decades of Capuchin indoctrination and “Christian reevaluation” of Indigenous cultural elements in line with Capuchin ideology and goals. The distinction suggested here between “rational” and “animal” speech (and by

²⁷ “The language of pigs” refers to the Inga name for the Kamëntšá language, which they call *coche*. According to Bonilla, “the explanation appears to rest in the old [Kamëntšá] custom of raising pigs in the swampy parts of their reservation” (p. 185).

implication, habits), reified by the Indigenous person who told this variant of the legend, exemplifies the internalization—individually and on the level of culture and society—of colonial hierarchies and the devalorization of Indigeneity; to speak an Indigenous language is to speak like an animal, unlike the human speech of “rational men” (i.e., Europeans). Also new in this version is a more clearly Christian reverence for the figure of Christ; his beating is referred to as a “sacrilege... committed against his divine personage,” while such unambiguous terms are absent from earlier iterations, suggesting greater fluency in the language of Catholicism—especially concerning themes of guilt, sin, and punishment—under the Capuchins than in earlier periods.

Nonetheless, as amply demonstrated by my analysis of the Indigenous symbolic and religious substrata exemplified in the legend, to acknowledge Indigenous cultural suppression as a distinguishing mark of colonialism is not to suggest that Indigenous cultural systems did not remain viable and resilient in the ways in which they were rearticulated and concealed by a colonially dominant overlay. Focusing on processes of deculturation over the accomplishments of Indigenous adaptation centers the agency of colonizers rather than that of Indigenous people. Referring to Indigenous religious and symbolic substrata, McDowell (1989) returns us to a more positive view of their survival under Christianization:

In the Sibundoy Valley very little of the precolumbian system survived the ministry of the Spanish priests intact, but it is remarkable how much of it persists to color the Catholicism of the valley and to provide a folk religious counterpart to the official religion of the land. ... In the Sibundoy Valley as elsewhere in the Andes, the conversion of the native peoples to the Catholic faith was perhaps deceptively successful. Conformance to the sacraments and submission to the priests masks a remarkable persistence of aboriginal patterns. (p. 189)

This dynamic, typical of the maintenance of concealed or “masked” Indigenous cultural elements under the explicit and official overlay of colonial culture—not only in religion but in domains as varied as folklore, ethnomedicine, carnival, and others—was first encapsulated in the legend of “Our Lord of Sibundoy,” demonstrating the viability of this operation from the time of earliest encounter.

A later exemplar of transculturation in the colonial period is the will of the legendary *cacique* Carlos Tamoabioy,²⁸ whose name is still evoked in the valley today. On March 15, 1700, Tamoabioy issued a will bequeathing legal title to all the lands under his rule upon his heirs and the community at large. At the time, his holdings included not only all the land of the Sibundoy Valley, but also several settlements to its north, such as Aponte, an Inga community two days’ walk across the highlands (Bonilla, 1968, pp. 27-31). The will was written in Spanish and is replete with Catholic references, indicating that Spanish was spoken by at least some Indigenous leaders and that Christianization continued apace, even in the general absence of missionaries in the valley. Tamoabioy’s will set a precedent for Indigenous land rights in the Sibundoy Valley, although it was soon to be challenged by avaricious settlers in a series of legal disputes that would typify the Indigenous struggle for territorial autonomy in later periods (pp. 33-36). In the 1730s, Sibundoy Valley natives suffered their first major land deprivation when a colonial court in Quito settled a land dispute in favor of colonists, depriving the former of a full half of their land to the north of the valley—namely the settlements of Jachinchoy and Abuelapamba (p. 35). Nevertheless, Tamoabioy’s will succeeded in safeguarding Indigenous land rights in the valley itself

²⁸ Also spelled “Tamabioy” in some of the literature. I opt for “Tamoabioy” because it predominates in the most recent literature and is the spelling preferred in Indigenous publications.

throughout much of the colonial period, an accomplishment for which he is still revered today.²⁹

Apart from the consequences of transculturation on display in the text of the will—the use of Spanish, Catholic references, and, importantly, the strategic adoption of the documentary and legal genres and norms of colonial society³⁰—there is another interesting consideration around the figure of Carlos Tamoabioy: that more than a historical figure, he is a legendary one. In an account transcribed by Friede (1945), an Indigenous interlocutor explains that

Carlos Tamabioy came to life one day in the morning, but not in the way that children are born; he was already large and developed. Seven wet nurses died of exhaustion trying to satisfy the uncommon appetite of the newborn, who grew in a prodigious manner. By noon, the child was an adult. In the afternoon he gathered all the Indians of Sibundoy, wrote a list of all their lands for them and their descendants, divided the lots, distributed them with set boundary lines, and died with the setting of the sun that very day. (p. 317)

This mythification of the historical Tamoabioy—which Friede identifies as “sanctification” (p. 318), although there are no obvious Christian elements in the quoted excerpt—evinces, on the one hand, the continued vitality and use of Indigenous mythic facilities in a movement through which “[p]ast events are raised to the mythic level and reinterpreted according to the native worldview” (Ramírez & Castaño, 1992, p. 293); and on the other, the continuity of the Andean symbolic and religious substrate referenced previously. McDowell (1994) describes

²⁹ As specified in Tamoabioy’s will, the land he bequeathed to his community bore his name. In recent years, Indigenous social movements in the Sibundoy Valley have referenced their land as the “Territorio Ancestral Cacique Carlos Tamoabioy” in a process which McDowell identifies as “the use of traditional motifs to feed the current political movement” and “[to claim] a kind of ecosovereignty over their ancestral domain” (personal communication, December 15, 2021). The political instrumentalization of Tamoabioy’s legacy could serve as the basis for a compelling study of ethnohistory in relation to contemporary social movements in the valley.

³⁰ Tamoabioy’s adoption of colonial legal genres and language is an excellent example of pragmatic and strategic adaptation on the part of Indigenous agents who made the most of the limited means available to them within a colonial system that ordinarily worked against them.

Tamoabioy “as a solar deity who arrived, provided for his people, and departed all in the course of a single day” (p. 36), recalling the solar symbolism of Andean origins that shows up in other cultural domains in the valley (Friede, 1945, p. 318; McDowell, 1989, 1994). In any case, in the case of Carlos Tamoabioy, the historical and the mythical are not incommensurable; it seems natural that such an important figure should have been deified in recognition of the service he rendered to his people.³¹

Here I have analyzed the dynamics of transculturation in the contact period and colonial era with reference to its two most significant textual examples. What these examples demonstrate, in different ways, is the operation by which foreign and colonially imposed cultural elements—religious, symbolic, semantic, etc.—were adopted but rearticulated, not simply copied, in a process of accommodation within a preexisting cultural framework. I have also emphasized that, despite the viability of this strategy of mediation between foreign and native cultural elements, the operation of transculturation in the colonial period differed qualitatively from transcultural processes in the prehispanic period, in which the question of power differentials and forcible imposition between mutually engaged cultures was less pertinent, if not absent. The logics of colonialism, which positioned Indigenous people and cultures as subordinate within a hierarchy positioning Europeans as superior, thereby devalorized Indigeneity and forced a degree of deculturation never experienced in the prehispanic period. Nevertheless, Indigenous cultures adapted by concealing native patterns beneath a superficially overlay of colonial culture. This strategy, itself a rearticulated form of the adaptive strategies employed in the prehispanic period, would again find itself tested by

³¹ Later, in the Capuchin period and in recent decades, the invocation of Tamoabioy’s name became central to Sibundoy Valley natives’ claims to their ancestral territory, to the extent that settlers have disputed the historical authenticity of the cacique in order to deny the legitimacy and proof of property of the Indigenous people over the reservation lands of Sibundoy and Aponte (Bonilla, 1968, p. 27). And while, as we will see, colonizers were successful for a time in dispossessing the heirs of Tamoabioy of their land by means of legal trickery, deceit, and plain theft, Tamoabioy’s promise was eventually vindicated—albeit 316 years after the fact. In 2016, the Colombian Ministry of the Interior formally returned the lands named in Tamoabioy’s will to his descendants (“Termina una disputa”).

the most transformative period of transculturation in the history of the valley: the Capuchin mission of the twentieth century.

The Capuchin Mission: 1904-1970

The Capuchin mission, established in 1904³² and dissolved in 1970, marks the most transformative phase of the colonial process in the history of the Sibundoy Valley. The Capuchin period began with the establishment of the Apostolic Prefecture of Caquetá and Putumayo, which by state decree was granted governing powers over an extensive area of southwest Colombia (Bonilla, 1968; Restrepo, 2006).³³ The stated goal of the mission, as articulated by the apostolic prefect who ruled at the height of its power, the Catalan³⁴ friar Fidel de Montclar, was to “introduce civilization to the virgin jungles,” (p. 74). This aspiration bore as its corollaries the indoctrination of natives into Catholicism, the suppression of their cultures, the economic development of the valley, the construction of roads connecting the valley with urban areas such as Pasto and Mocoa, the demographic colonization of the valley by settlers from other parts of Colombia, and other processes that radically altered life in the valley for its Indigenous peoples (Chaves 1945; Escandón, 1913; Gómez, 2005, 2011, 2015; “Informes,” 1916; Uribe, 2011, 2019). This section explores Indigenous responses to transculturation in this most transformative period, particularly through a strategy termed “concealment” by Sandoval Zapata and Lasso Otaya (2014).

³² Although the formal date of establishment of the mission was December 20, 1904, by papal decree, the Capuchins had worked informally in the Sibundoy Valley since 1899, and much of the infrastructure of the mission was already in place by its official establishment (Bonilla, 1968).

³³ In the early decades of the Apostolic Prefecture’s existence, neither the Colombian state nor its missionary agents could claim *de facto* control over or even effective presence in the extensive expanse of the Amazon that Colombia claimed as part of its national territory. The process of consolidating state presence and national borders in the far reaches of the Amazonian frontier would not be “complete” until the mid-twentieth century, particularly after the Colombia-Peru War of 1932-33, which formalized the Colombian-Peruvian border (Recalde, 2006). The missionaries themselves were central agents in the process of state formation in the frontier regions, as Gómez (2011, 2015) has convincingly shown, and as the missionaries themselves attest in their writings (Escandón, 1913; “Informes,” 1916; Restrepo, 2006). It could be argued, however, that the Colombian state has never effectively exercised political control over much of its Amazonian territory, and still today large parts of the region remain under the control of guerrilla and narcotrafficking groups.

³⁴ Most of the leadership of the Apostolic Prefecture were Catalans from Spain; Colombians tended to be of lower rank than the Spaniards. The two most prominent friars to govern the Apostolic Prefecture for most of its existence, Fidel de Montclar and Bartolomé de Igualada, were both Catalans (Bonilla, 1968).

Concealment describes the masking of Indigenous cultural elements under a Catholic and colonial semantic and aesthetic overlay in order to avoid the repression with which the Capuchins often responded to explicit displays of Indigeneity. I suggest that concealment, in addition to the forms of accommodation and selective incorporation of foreign cultural elements already discussed, constitutes a primary adaptive strategy for cultural survival during the Capuchin period.

Before analyzing Indigenous transculturation under the Capuchins, the basic policy of their rule should be explained. Besides the moralizing goals of Catholic indoctrination, the “civilizing” mission of the Capuchins also had the purpose of bringing Indigenous groups into the orbit of the Colombian state; the missionaries acted as delegates of a state which empowered them to colonize and settle the frontier in the name of the Colombian nation (Bonilla, 1968; Gómez, 2005; Mongua Calderón, 2020; Restrepo, 2006; Sandoval Zapata & Lasso Otaya, 2014).³⁵ The alliance between the Capuchins and the state, and the role of the former in advancing the interests, and the effective frontier, of the latter was by no means covert; De Montclar wrote in 1914 that “the missionaries are the principal factors behind the influence and aggrandizement [of the state]” (Bonilla, 1968, pp. 284-85). In essence,

the coercive systems imposed by the Capuchin mission on the Inga and Kamsá Indians of the Sibundoy Valley, from the beginning of the twentieth century to the late 1960s, [had the goal of] usurping their ancestral lands, controlling and appropriating their labor, effecting their physical and spiritual subjection within the general process of “civilizing the savages,” and incorporating the eastern Amazonian territories into

³⁵ The relationship between state and Church was reciprocal, as a series of laws in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries stipulated that the state had an obligation to protect the Church, while in return the Church was obliged to put a portion of the annual indemnity payments towards “the fomentation of the evangelization of savages” (Bonilla, 1968, p. 58). According to Bonilla, this set a standard that, “since then, came to form part of the habitual relations between the two powers” (p. 58).

the economic, political, and sociocultural ambit of the nascent “national society” of Colombia. (Gómez, 2005, p. 51)

The consequence, for the natives of the valley, of the alliance between the Capuchins and the state was that the missionaries were given free rein to deploy the most repressive policies in the name of “civilizing the savages” and advancing the interests of the Colombian nation.

The first problem identified by the Capuchins upon their arrival to the valley was the question of religion. In the eyes of the Capuchins, the syncretic folk Catholicism that had been practiced in the Sibundoy Valley for centuries prior to their arrival was in need of correction (Bonilla, 1968; McDowell, 1989, 1994). This “correction” took the form of orthodox catechism and the establishment of mission schools for the instruction of Indigenous children. In the churches, natives were to learn the doctrine of orthodox Catholicism; in the schools, they were to learn Spanish and receive a Western education that would begin to redeem them of the state of “barbarism” and “savagery” that was thought to be natural condition of Indigenous people (Escandón, 1916; “Informes,” 1913; Recalde, 2002). Indeed, churches and schools were the two primary and mutually reinforcing instruments of Capuchin power (Restrepo, 2006).³⁶ Taussig (1987) relates the zeal with which the missionaries set about their work in the early years of the mission:

In 1899 there were only five Capuchins at work [in the Putumayo]. In two and a half years they performed 1,010 baptisms and 263 marriages. By 1927 there were 62 missionaries, 29 churches, 61 schools, two hospitals, five dispensaries, and 29 cemeteries. (p. 311)

³⁶ Foucault (1982) has written on the importance of schools as sites of discipline by which people are made subjects of power. Certainly this was true in the Capuchin mission and of schools in numerous other colonial situations. Quijano’s (2000) notion of the colonality of power is also applicable here; where better than in the schools of the mission to find all in one place the systems of hierarchies, of knowledge, and of culture that collectively establish and reify colonial power?

The proliferation of churches in the valley facilitated the apparent conversion, within the first several decades of the establishment of the mission, of the majority of natives to the orthodox form of Catholicism prescribed by the Capuchins, while in the schools, native children learned Spanish, to behave like their colono classmates, and to identify as Colombian before Indigenous, let alone Inga or Kamëntšá specifically (Bonilla, 1968; Bolaños, 2017; Gómez, 2005).

While Indigenous culture was under attack by the repression and impositions of the Capuchins, Indigenous land rights in the valley were rapidly being eroded by the large-scale immigration of colonos into the valley from other parts of Colombia, principally Nariño, the neighboring department of which Pasto is capital. This settlement was encouraged and aided by the Capuchins, who in 1902 founded the town of San Francisco to settle colonos apart from the Indigenous towns of the valley (Bonilla, 1968, p. 69). In 1911 the town of Sucre, today called Colón, was founded for the same purpose (p. 287). In both the Indigenous and the newly founded colono towns of the valley, the Capuchins introduced rectilinear urban planning, contrary to Indigenous tradition. Colonial urban planning was essentially centralist, with settlements radiating from the central plaza dominated by a church and official buildings. This was the design according to which the Indigenous towns of the valley were transformed spatially as well as demographically. The influx of colono immigrants to the valley was part of a concerted plan on the part of mission and state authorities to advance the colonization of the Putumayo frontier in its broader extent (p. 106; Gómez, 2011, 2015).

How did the Indigenous communities of the valley respond to such considerable changes? In the first instance, many opted to abandon the towns of the central valley in favor of the less productive but more distant lands of its periphery. Faced with fanatical missionaries on the one hand and avaricious, land-stealing colonos on the other, many Indigenous families seemed to prefer the relative, if temporary, quietude of the surrounding

hills—a choice which the Capuchins, of course, branded as “ingratitude,” but which for the natives themselves was an act of defiant autonomy (Bonilla, 1968, p. 71). When the Capuchins sought, using violent punishment, to incentivize the natives who abandoned the towns of the valley to return and repopulate them, they only encouraged further abandonment (p. 80). It was also common practice, in the early years of the mission, for Indigenous parents to prevent their children from attending mission schools; with the opening of the first schools there was only one Indigenous student in Sibundoy and two in Santiago, out of a population of several thousand Indigenous people in the vicinity of both towns (p. 72).

Yet such abandonment was only the prelude to a period of insurgency that, increasingly threatened by the encroachments of colonos and the growing land holdings of the mission itself, the Indigenous communities of the valley carried out during the first several years after the founding of the mission. Bonilla writes that

[w]ith the slow advance of the white invasion and the hardening of the Capuchin proceedings, the traditional pacifism of the Sibundoyos gave way to acts of terrorism, carefully directed towards the desisting of colono residence and of the work of the missionaries. (p. 82)

Such “terrorism” took the form of violence directed not against the missionaries, but against their property, including their prized livestock, which were sometimes killed overnight by anonymous Kamëntšá insurgents (p. 82). The Inga, too, employed “terrorism” to resist the advances of the colonos and missionaries, burning one missionary’s ranch and maiming the apostolic prefect’s horse (p. 83). This period of insurgency corresponds to the first two years of the mission, building on a legacy of Indigenous-settler conflict that began before the formal establishment of the mission.³⁷

³⁷ The first reference I have found to anti-colono violence prior to the establishment of the mission occurred towards the end of 1902, when a group of Kamëntšá angered by recent episodes of land theft burned the colono hamlet of Molina (Bonilla, 1968, p. 70). Land disputes of a less overtly violent nature began long before, however, in the colonial period.

Ultimately, however, such resistant practices—which recall James C. Scott’s (1985) notion of “weapons of the weak”—proved unable to prevent the consolidation and expansion of the Capuchin mission. Gradually, as the power of the mission and its ability to exercise coercive force over the natives of the valley grew, and through cultural repression and the diligence Capuchin indoctrination efforts, the deculturating work of the missionaries began to take effect.

A telling example of the early success of Capuchin indoctrination is related by the Colombian engineer and traveler Miguel Triana, who visited the valley in 1906. Triana visited a mission school in the Inga town of Santiago in the western valley, where he witnessed the students singing the national anthem. This performance was followed by a speech given by a student named Manuel Tisoy, who was said to be the best in his class.³⁸ Tisoy’s speech ended with the proclamation that “we have now been raised from the condition of savagery,” and then, “with our heads bowed, we beg, by God, that you [the missionaries and Triana, i.e., white Colombians] do not leave us strangled by the tangled thicket of barbarism” (Triana, 1950, p. 337). This scene demonstrates that, even at this early stage, the labor of the Capuchins had begun to work its transculturating effects; the singing of the national anthem by Indigenous children, their use of Spanish, and Tisoy’s speech of subservience all indicate the apparent early “success” of the Capuchin project in instilling colonial culture at the expense of native ones.

But to what extent was that “success” only apparent? Certainly the Capuchins were successful in furthering many of their basic “civilizing” goals—indoctrination in orthodox Catholicism, teaching Spanish, and bringing the socioeconomic changes they associated with “civilization” into the valley and its Indigenous communities. That is by no means, however,

³⁸ While I have no direct evidence to support this conjecture, it is conceivable that Manuel was a member of the locally prominent Tisoy family, early native supporters of the Capuchins who would later turn against them over a significant land dispute case (Bonilla, 1968). This possible connection points to the function that native elites in colonial situations have often served in legitimizing and serving the interests of colonial power.

to suggest that their efforts to deculturate the Indigenous communities of the valley were wholly successful.³⁹ Instead, the transcultural experience in the Capuchin period involved the rearticulation of Indigeneity through its concealment under the semantic overlay imposed by the missionaries. Additionally, the natives of the valley continued contesting and negotiating colonial power in the same ways as previously examined in the context of earlier periods in the valley's history. Indigenous folklore, ethnomedicine, shamanism, and carnival are cultural domains which provide particularly compelling evidence of the rearticulation of Indigeneity during the Capuchin period, a phenomenon which I now explore in each.

The domain of folklore, especially the subset of orality that McDowell terms “the sayings of the ancestors,” is an important one for the interpretation of Indigenous cultural rearticulation under the Capuchins. The Indigenous communities of the valley have long maintained an oral tradition which embodies a corpus of stories, myths, and popular wisdom reproduced since prehispanic times, and which has incorporated foreign elements since the colonial encounter (McDowell, 1989, 1992, 1994; Juajibioy, 1987, 1989). According to McDowell, a careful distinction made between two self-contained but equally valid categories of narrative content—called, in Kamëntšá, *bngabe soy*, “our things,” and *xkenungabe soy*, “white people's things”—is at the heart of the preservation of Sibundoy Valley mythic narrative (1994, p. 18).⁴⁰ Mythic narrative and folklore provided a space in which Indigenous cultures could articulate and make sense of their identities without

³⁹ This is, in turn, not to suggest that the real deculturation experienced by the Indigenous communities of the valley was not highly destructive and traumatic. The intention here is to highlight the agency and adaptability of the Indigenous communities without downplaying the catastrophic nature of colonialism as experienced in the Sibundoy Valley and elsewhere.

⁴⁰ McDowell, expanding on this point, writes:

There is a clear differentiation of this treasury of mythic narrative, which is marked by explicit cover terms, *antswanos* in Kamsá, and *antioj parlo* in Inga. The fact that this terminology proceeds from Spanish loan words suggests that the advent of the soldiers and missionaries brought a newfound need to distinguish the indigenous stories from other kinds of stories. Only those stories centering on the exploits of the ancestors merit inclusion in this category of narrative, and these stories are especially valued. The intrusion of extraneous narrative material, for example biblical stories or folk narrative brought in from Colombian national traditions, are censured by comments such as “stick to the old ones, Brother.” (1989, p. 105)

expressly contravening the dictates of the Capuchins. This mediation was accomplished by situating narratives concerning precolonial themes, customs, beliefs, or characters (“the ancestors”) in a prehispanic past clearly set apart from, but which still influences, the colonial present. “The tales of the ancestors,” for instance, center on “the pivotal movement from the raw time to the time of fire, a formative period when the exemplary deeds of the ancestors established precedents for behavior that remain in force to the present moment” (McDowell, 1992, p. 100). This movement, which is typical of the whole domain of narrative associated with “the ancestors,” establishes a direct historical through line between past and present, in which “the sayings of the ancestors derive validity from their encapsulation of wisdom originating in ancestral times... [forging] a link across time, connecting the events of the present the sources of power and knowledge concentrated in earlier cosmic moments” (1989, p. 104). Although the sayings of the ancestors were located outside the Christian domain, they did not conflict with it, and Sibundoy Valley natives could hold both as conceptually separate but equally valid—although in contexts of traditional narrative performance, the Indigenous was even privileged above the foreign (p. 118).

The above description of Indigenous narrative accords with the pattern of accommodation—the situation of foreign elements within Indigenous cultural systems—that we have so far established as at work in numerous Indigenous cultural domains in the valley. But we can also see the process of concealment defined by Sandoval Zapata and Lasso Otaya (2014) at play in the narrative domain, specifically in its relation to the “spirit realm” left over as “residue” from the primordial past of the pre-Christian ancestors (p. 126). The spirit realm consists of an “underground of time” on which the shamans of the Sibundoy Valley could draw in their syncretic magical and healing rituals. In Taussig’s (1987) florid rendering:

Such flowerings whereby an anterior epoch exerts its usually baneful influence on the present occur with the full or new moon, at dawn or at dusk—and we shall have reason to remember this flowering of an underground of time when we later consider the ways by which history itself acts like a sorcerer in the creator of *la mala hora*, the evil hour, in the Sibundoy Valley of Colombia. There, also, connections are made with what seems like an underground of pre-Spanish conquest ‘other’ time, and while this buried epoch flowers in quasi-satanic form to bewitch the present, and even kill, this very same deposition of history can be appealed to for healing as well. (pp. 229-30)

If ancestral knowledge—and its reputation as bestowing magical powers greater than those accessible in present, post-conquest, Christian times—is recovered through spiritual vision in the modern period, marked (or marred) by the advent of missionaries and Catholicism, does its recuperation through the use of rituals and shamanic technologies banned by the mission suggest a resistance to colonially imposed thought? Here we catch a glimpse of a magical past concealed by a rather more mundane present, officially and ordinary off-limits according to the dictates of the missionaries but still clandestinely drawn upon by narrative and shamanic techniques which revalorize the Indigenous past.

Ethnomedicine is another domain which demonstrates the interplay of accommodation and concealment as processes of Indigenous cultural rearticulation. The ethnomedical system of the Kamëntšá, similar but not identical to that of the Inga, has been thoroughly described by the medical anthropologist Haydée Seijas (1969). Seijas describes a situation of coexistence between two medical traditions, the Indigenous and the Western. The former is represented by traditional household curers and medicine men, and the latter by drugstore attendants, a clinician priest, and the staff of the one hospital in the valley at time of writing (pp. 35-38). At the time that Seijas was resident in the valley, from the mid- to late

1960s, the Indigenous medical tradition remained not only a viable alternative to the Western system, but the preferred option for most of the Indigenous population, particularly when treatment was sought for diseases thought to be of mystical origin. As Seijas writes,

[a]lthough the services of non-Indian practitioners—as well as patent drugs—are used by many concurrently with curing ceremonies in cases thought to be mystically caused, the [Kamëntšá] maintain that diseases caused by evil wind or by sorcery can be treated successfully only by Indian specialists. (p. 133)

The preference shown to Indigenous specialists over Western practitioners—which is partly a matter of the greater cost of the latter, but also explicable on a cultural basis (pp. 154-55)—especially in cases of illnesses thought to have a mystical basis demonstrates greater valorization of Indigenous medical traditions than Western. Also important is that the Indigenous medical tradition is intrinsically related to the domains of Indigenous narrative, spirituality, and ethnobotany, since the etiological categories of Indigenous ethnomedicine emphasize the ultimate (i.e., supernatural) as opposed to the immediate (i.e., material, biological) causes of disease, and the healing rituals that seek to address those causes involve both the supplication of supernatural forces of a syncretic nature, and the use of plant medicines such as yagé (pp. 110, 136). Preference given to Indigenous traditions over colonially imposed ones in any given domain have also, similarly, informed the same operation in the other interrelated domains. The choice exercised by the Indigenous peoples of the valley to valorize traditions in the Indigenous domains—from traditional mythic narrative to native spirituality, from ethnomedicine to ethnobotany—may be read as a conscious decision to assign priority to those domains over and rather than, or at least alongside, those of colonial power. Concealment, on the other hand, is evinced in the

clandestine continuation of prehispanic shamanic and ethnomedical⁴¹ traditions under the overlay of a syncretic Catholicism and despite the prohibitions of Capuchin authorities—prohibitions which were effectively unenforceable (Bristol, 1965, 1966, 1969; McDowell, 1989, 1994; Ramírez & Castaño, 1992; Sandoval Zapata & Lasso Oyata, 2014; Schultes, 1988; Seijas, 1969; Tausig, 1987).

To cite a final example from the ethnographic literature, accommodation and especially concealment are again at play in another significant domain, that of Indigenous festivities. The most notable case is that of the Carnival of Pardon,⁴² the most significant annual carnival celebrated in the valley. The carnival evinces symbolic and performative syncretism incorporating both Indigenous and Catholic motifs and traditions, but the Indigenous elements constitute a greater share of the whole (Castaño, 2021; Quiñones Triana, 2019; Tobar & Gómez, 2004). McDowell (1992) writes of the regenerative and tradition-reifying function of the carnival, during which “the ancestors appear to walk the earth once again, and the modern people renew their contract with the ancestral model” (p. 110), while for Sandoval Zapata and Lasso Oyata (2014) the Indigenous festivities present a total subversion of Catholic ritual:

[H]ere we witness a double concealment: on the one hand to deny, on the other to resist. The Catholic church assumes a degree of control and influence over the Indigenous ritual upon introducing the Carnaval del Perdón via a mass and speaking sporadically in Inga or Kamëntsá, but it is observed in the mass that what really happens is a seizure of the church. The colorful clothes of the Indians pack the place;

⁴¹ While shamanism and ethnomedicine are closely intertwined in the Sibundoy Valley, they are not synonymous. Shamans are referred to generally as *taitas* and sought out for cures concerning both physical and spiritual ailments, but are held in special regard as spiritual healers. Household curers specialize primarily in the treatment of physical ailments using botanical remedies. *Taitas* also generally double as respected community leaders, while household curers enjoy a less privileged social status (Seijas, 1969).

⁴² Carnaval del Perdón; also known as Clëstrinye o Bëtsknaté, with variable orthography.

the drums, the dulzainas, the flutes and the shouts counterpose the near-total silence that customarily accompanies the mass. (p. 51)

Although the Indigenous festivals have been subject to the same syncretism as the other domains we have interpreted, Indigenous agency has bended colonially imposed elements in this domain to the natives' own ends in a process of quiet subversion. The Catholic mass is Indigenized, turned on its head; Indigenous traditions are expressed and celebrated in the same sites of power from which the Capuchin fathers proclaimed their repressive dictates and decried Indigenous customs as "savage" and "barbaric." Here, again, the Indigenous communities of the valley have weaponized the colonial cultural overlay imposed on them in order to rearticulate their Indigeneity. Taussig (1987) may be right when he writes that "Indianness in outward display was recast into a thing that could be exhibited under controlled circumstances only" (p. 311-12), but he misses that sometimes it was the natives who controlled the circumstances.

The strategies of accommodation and concealment discussed above are not unique to the domains interpreted, but permeate all aspects of Indigenous culture in the Sibundoy Valley. If it is true that in many respects the Capuchins and other agents of colonial power managed to effect a degree of deculturation over the Indigenous cultures they sought to suppress, it is nonetheless clear that Indigenous cultural domains such as narrative, religion, shamanism, ethnobotany, ethnomedicine, festivities, and others have maintained their integrity to a remarkable degree. This has been accomplished through processes of accommodation and concealment employed as primary adaptive strategies in the Sibundoy Valley—the first building on a long tradition dating to prehispanic times, the second developing as a novel cultural survival strategy during the Capuchin period itself. The preceding analysis of both strategies as they have operated in various contexts and cultural

domains has demonstrated their efficacy in preserving the cultural integrity of the Indigenous peoples of the valley while mitigating the transculturating effects of the colonial encounter.

Conclusion

The Sibundoy Valley is, in some respects, unexceptional with respect to its history of transculturation, whether prior to or following the colonial encounter and its long shadow. The Sibundoy Valley is not unique as a site of encounter between cultures of different origins in the prehispanic era—Andean on the one hand, Amazonian on the other. To varying degrees at different times and places, this type of encounter occurred along the length of the Andes-Amazon interface. Nor are the natives of the Sibundoy Valley necessarily distinctive in terms of the strategies they employed to negotiate transculturation and to preserve and rearticulate their cultures following the colonial encounter. Indeed, it is the typical character of transculturation as it has occurred in the Sibundoy Valley that makes it an excellent case study for the operation of transculturation in general and under a variety of historical conditions—pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial. By tracing the historical experience of transculturation in the Indigenous communities of the Sibundoy Valley, from the prehispanic period through the Spanish colonial period and the Capuchin mission of the twentieth century, I have demonstrated that the native cultures of the valley have rearticulated and reproduced themselves by selectively incorporating foreign cultural elements into an adaptable and preexisting Indigenous framework. By this operation, they have undergone the triadic loss-gain-creation process that defines transculturation in general, resulting in the emergence of novel and resilient Indigeneities that have survived the challenges of the past in order, now, to face those of the present. In this respect, the case of the Sibundoy Valley has much to offer for a cross-cultural analysis of Indigenous transculturation and cultural survival in colonial situations in general.

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