

2

American Experiments

1521–1700

The “age of exploration” resulted in the establishment of many different colonies in the Americas. As no single model prevailed, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are best understood as a period of colonial experimentation. European colonists projected onto their communities the intellectual and cultural hallmarks of the world they left behind, but the unique challenges they faced also demanded change and innovation. The new world was not “discovered” so much as it was forged through crisis and adaptation by the Europeans, Native Americans, and imported Africans who found themselves occupying common ground.

This chapter focuses on the forces that shaped colonial society and the ways that colonists interacted with their new surroundings. In the Spanish tribute colonies, Europeans extracted resources from indigenous peoples, but their efforts were met with native resistance. In New England, John Winthrop viewed the planting of a colony as a leap of faith, but even the Puritans’ godly commonwealth faced conflict as the religious debates that wracked Europe spread to the colonies. As plantations were established, changing systems of trade and a growing dependence on race-based slavery came to define enduring racial and economic patterns. Finally, as colonists were not settling an empty continent, in many ways their experiences were shaped by conflicts and encounters with indigenous peoples.

2-1 | Indians Resist Spanish Conquest

Testimony of Acoma Indians (1599)

The colonies that Spain established in the Americas rewarded their conquistadors with rich land from which they extracted labor and tribute from conquered indigenous peoples. Spain’s process of imposing Catholicism and its cultural and political interests onto its colonies, while

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largely successful, was sometimes met with resistance from the Indian majority. In the pueblo of Acoma in 1598, Indians attacked and killed several Spanish officials. The source included here is the official Spanish report of the incident, including the testimony from several Indians.

Statement of Indian Caoma

On this same day, February 9, the governor ordered testimony taken from an Indian through Don Tomás, a Christian Indian interpreter, who swore by God and a cross in due legal manner to declare faithfully all that might be said by this and the other Indians in their testimony. He said: "I so swear, amen."

The interpreter said that this Indian was named Caoma, a native of the pueblo of Acoma, and the captain of one of the wards of this pueblo. Not being a Christian he was not asked to take an oath. He explained through the interpreter that he was not present at Acoma when they killed the maese de campo and the others, as he had gone to the country. When he returned on the night of the day they were killed, the Indians at the pueblo told him how the maese de campo and his men came to the pueblo and asked the natives to furnish them with the maize and flour which they needed, and because they asked for such large amounts they killed them. He was very sorry for what the Indians had done and denounced them for it. Then the governor asked him to explain why it was that when the sargento mayor and the soldiers went to his pueblo to summon them to peace, the Indians, instead of submitting, attacked with arrows, stones, and clubs. He replied that they refused to come down peacefully and to be friends because they had already killed the Spaniards, but he urged the Indians, both men and women, all of whom hurled stones, to submit peacefully, but they refused.

This witness was asked to tell who dug up the two small field pieces, the horseshoes, and other iron goods that the Spaniards had buried near Acoma when they were unable to carry it further. He answered that Indians of the pueblo dug it up, carried it away, and divided it among themselves, each one taking his share. This is the truth and what he knows. He gave this testimony in the presence of Captain Alonso Gómez, his defense attorney, who signed it, together with the governor. Don Juan de Oñate. Alonso Gómez Montesinos. Before me, Juan Gutiérrez Bocanegra, secretary.

Statement of Cat-ticati

Immediately thereafter, on this same day, the governor called before him an Indian named Cat-ticati, a native of the pueblo of Acoma, who testified through the interpreter that he did not know how old he was, but perhaps about thirty-five years. He declared that he was not present when the maese de campo and the other soldiers were killed, but that he learned about it at the pueblo when he returned. They had killed them because they asked for maize, flour, and blankets.

Asked why the Indians refused to accept peace and to come down from the pueblo when the sargento mayor summoned them, he replied that they declined to submit and accept peace since they had already killed the Spaniards.

Asked why, when the sargento mayor offered them peace, they not only rejected it but shot arrows and hurled rocks and insulting words, he replied that some shot arrows and threw stones but there were some who did not want to fight. To other questions he replied that he was telling the truth. All of this took place in the presence of his defense attorney, who signed his testimony, together with the governor. Don Juan de Oñate. Alonso Gómez Montesinos. Before me, Juan Gutiérrez Bocanegra, secretary.

Testimony of Indian Taxio

This same day the governor called before him an Indian named Taxio, a native of the pueblo of Acoma, who did not know how old he was, but who seemed to be about twenty-three years.

Asked why he and the other Indians of Acoma killed the maese de campo and ten other soldiers and two servants, he said that when they began to kill them, he was at home, but when he heard the shouting that they were killing the Spaniards, he went up to the roof and stayed there and saw a dead Spaniard and that the others whom they had killed had been thrown down the rocks.

Asked why, when the sargento mayor offered the Indians peace, he and the others did not come down to accept but shot many arrows and threw rocks and cried for the Spaniards to come on and fight, he said that the old people and other leading Indians did not want peace, and for this reason they attacked with arrows and stones.

Asked why the Indian women threw rocks and helped in the fight, he said it was because they were together with the men and therefore they took part in the demonstrations and the fighting. He made this statement in the presence of the defender, who signed it. To other questions he said that he had spoken the truth, and he ratified his testimony, after it was explained to him. The interpreter did not sign this statement or the others, because he did not know how. Don Juan de Oñate. Alonso Gómez Montesinos. Before me, Juan Gutiérrez Bocanegra, secretary.

Statement of Indian Xunusta

This same day the governor called before him an Indian who, according to the interpreter, was named Xunusta, a native of the pueblo of Acoma. He did not know how old he was, but seemed to be about twenty-two years.

Asked why he and the other Indians of the pueblo had killed the maese de campo and his men, he said that the Spaniards first killed an Indian, and then all the Indians became very angry and killed them.

Asked why it was that when the sargento mayor asked them to accept peace they did not come down from the pueblo but shot many arrows and threw rocks and clubs, both men and women taking part in the fray, he said that some of the Indians wanted to make peace but others did not, and because they could not agree, they would not submit. This statement was given in the presence of their defender, who signed it, but the interpreter did not because he did not know how

to write, though he ratified the testimony when it was read to him. Don Juan de Oñate. Alonso Gómez Montesinos. Before me, Juan Gutiérrez Bocanegra, secretary.

Statement of Indian Excasi

Immediately thereafter, on this same day, the governor called before him an Indian who, according to the interpreter, was named Excasi, a native of the pueblo of Acoma. He did not know his age, but seemed to be about twenty-five years.

Asked why he and the other Indians of the pueblo killed the maese de campo, two captains, eight soldiers, and two servants, he said that he did not see them killed but that he saw his people throw the bodies down the rocks. He had heard it said that they killed the Spaniards because a soldier either asked for or took a turkey.

Asked why the Indians did not accept peace when the sargento mayor appealed to them and asked them to come down and be friends, which he did many times, the Indian said that he did not want to fight, but others did, and therefore they did not submit.

Asked why they shot arrows and threw stones from the pueblo when they had been summoned to peace, he repeated what he had already said. This is the truth, and he ratified it. Done in the presence of the defender, who signed. Don Juan de Oñate. Alonso Gómez de Montesinos. Before me, Juan Gutiérrez Bocanegra, secretary.

Statement of Indian Caucachi

Immediately thereafter, on this same day, the governor called before him an Indian who, according to the interpreter, was called Caucachi, a native of the pueblo of Acoma. He did not know how old he was, but appeared to be about fifty.

Asked why he and the other Indians of the pueblo had killed the maese de campo and the other ten Spaniards and two servants, he said that the Spaniards had wounded an Acoma Indian and for this reason his people became angry and killed them.

Asked why it was that when the sargento mayor asked them to accept peace, they not only refused his offer but cried out that they wanted to fight and shot arrows and hurled stones, he said that since some of the Acomas did not wish to make friends, they began to fight. He was asked other questions, but replied that what he had said was the truth. He ratified his testimony in the presence of his defender, who signed. Don Juan de Oñate. Alonso Gómez Montesinos. Before me, Juan Gutiérrez Bocanegra, secretary.

READING AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Whose point of view does this source express? How does that perspective shape your understanding of the event it describes?

2. What inferences can you draw about the daily relationships between the Spanish rulers and the Indians in the pueblo of Acoma?
3. Compare the testimony of these Indians. How do you explain any contradictions you find? What limitations does this source present to the historian trying to reconstruct the events it claims to describe?