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Mazanet's 1693 "Report to the Viceroy:" The Role of Alterity, Bare Life, and Agency in the Attitude of a Spanish Friar against Texas Amerindians

Cover Page Footnote

I thank Raymond Jones for his help with the editing of this paper.

This is a story like many others: a religious man starts full of zeal for evangelizing, but ends up bitter against Native Americans. One difference in this case may be that most stories hide such bitterness, and this one does not. A more important difference is that, in this case, the bitterness, along with other factors, helped drive the Amerindians into a type of resistance that forced the Spaniards out of their territory.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate how the beliefs and attitudes about the Texas Indians expressed by Damián Mazanet--along with the textual silences about the same—unexpectedly show such Amerindians as agents who refuse to be subjugated by the Spanish friars and soldiers in seventeenth century Texas. First, however, we need a historical introduction, and then we will be ready to analyze his 1693 *Report to the Viceroy*. In this text we will look for signs of this friar's view of Amerindians as an inferior 'Other' and as barely human beings, which led him to instate measures of bio-power to control their populations, thus inadvertently eliciting Native American agency in response to his policies. This analysis will be based on: (a) Tzvetan Todorov's concept of alterity, which explains how many Spaniards saw Amerindians as deprived of the essence as separate and worthy enough human beings, (b) Giorgio Agamben's notion of bare life, which clarifies how Native Americans were reduced to a state between man and beast, (c) Michel Foucault's idea of bio-power or policies of population control, and (d) John Mowitt and Paul Smith's concept of agency, which stresses the possibility of resistance¹.

It all begins with the colonization of Texas, which started in 1690, relatively late compared to that of Florida—in 1513—and New Mexico—in 1598. David J. Weber explains such lateness when he affirms that, "stretched too thin to initiate settlements throughout the hemisphere, Spain concentrated on vital areas," such as good harbors

and the route of the silver fleets. However, “in the peripheral areas of the empire, Madrid took no action until foreign powers threatened” (152). Indeed, Spain was not motivated to populate Texas until it received news of French troops entering what it considered its territory (Gómez Canedo vii). Spaniards considered Texas to be theirs because in 1493, Spanish Pope Alexander VI had divided the newly explored part of the world in two, as part of his Donation Bulls, with Spain receiving all of the Western Hemisphere except for Brazil.

For decades, Spanish rule was uncontested in North America, but in 1682 the troops of Frenchman René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, descended the Mississippi River until they reached its mouth, at which point France started representing a threat to the Spanish political monopoly. “The principal purpose of Sieur de La Salle in making this discovery was to find a port on the Gulf of Mexico on which could be formed a French settlement to serve as a base for conquest upon the Spaniards,” affirmed in 1682 the Marquis de Seignelay, minister of Louis XIV (Kessell 125).

In the ensuing years, different expeditions left New Spain² to combat La Salle, conquer New Spain’s Northern territory and colonize the Native Americans politically and religiously (Weber 151-52). Part of the plan was to establish Catholic missions to subdue and Christianize Amerindians, but the main purpose was to stop any other foreign powers from conquering North American lands (Gómez Canedo vii). After three expeditions from 1686 to 1688 by Alonso de León, governor of New León, his most successful trip was that of 1689, in which he discovered the French Fort St. Louis in ruins after the fortification had been attacked by Karankawa Indians³. These had destroyed the fort and killed all the Frenchmen but two, in retribution for the French having taken some

of their canoes without paying for them. The sequence of events became clear later on: La Salle boat capsized, his own men killed him in 1687, the French colonists built the fort, and the Amerindians attacked it (Weber 152).

One of the participants of León's 1689 voyage was Damián Mazanet, a Spanish Franciscan friar who had come to Mexico in 1683 and helped found the College of Santa Cruz de Querétaro. He also founded the San Salvador mission in Coahuila. Out of this voyage and the following ones throughout the nineties, Mazanet penned several letters and reports to the New Spain authorities. Known are eight, all published by Lino Gómez Canedo in his *Primeras exploraciones y poblamiento de Texas (1686-1694)*.

At the beginning, Mazanet was very enthusiastic about the Native Americans and their conversion. For instance, in his 1690 letter to Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora⁴, he narrates how he is impressed with the charity of the Indians who took a partially burnt man back to the vicinity of the Spanish camp ("Carta a Sigüenza y Góngora" 10). In what seems like expressions that these Amerindians are monotheistic and ready for Christianizing, Mazanet also tells Sigüenza that (a) the Texas Indians do not give any offerings to their idols, just to their omnipotent creator; and (b) that they also believe that the friars are ministers of their *Ayimat Caddi*, meaning the Texas Indians' Great Captain ("Carta a Sigüenza y Góngora" 30). That year Mazanet and León founded the first Texas mission, called San Francisco de los Tejas, near present Augusta, Texas. In 1691. León died, and Mazanet stayed with the Texas Indians.

In 1690 Mazanet enthusiastically writes to the count of Galve, Viceroy of New Spain, about the "conversion de aquellos pobres infieles," and adds that Christ "siente más una alma que se pierde por falta de ministros que todo lo que padeció en su muerte

y pasión" ("Carta al Conde de Galve, 1690" 159). He adds that the Texas Indians are "gente inclinada al trabajo, que siembran maíz, frijoles, sandías, calabazas y otras semillas que tienen" (161). The friar reiterates that the double purpose of colonizing Texas has to do with the evangelization of the Texas Indians, so that they may help in the attempts to keep the French out of the area. Mazanet even mentions instances of these helpful Indians taking French prisoners ("Carta a Sigüenza y Góngora" 33).

In 1692 we continue seeing Mazanet as a Native American advocate of sorts, in spite of ordering a number of punishments. For instance, a tribe called the Guatsas⁵ steals most of the Spanish horses. He orders the soldiers to bring the Amerindian chief in order to punish him. Soldiers find the chief, stab him twice in the head, release him, and ask him to go back and bring the horses, lest the Spaniards take them themselves from the tribe. In the end they do go to the tribe and bring back four horses. Even though Mazanet himself ordered this penalty, he states that the soldiers' actions were too hard and the Indians are justified in their distrust of the Spanish and their rebellion against them. As another example of soldier abuse, he narrates how an officer "forzó todas las indias que le pareció" ("Carta al Virrey, 1692" 265). Mazanet blames all these problems on the poor administration and lax leadership of the present governor, Domingo Terán ("Carta al Virrey, 1692" 266-69). Nevertheless, he himself had some authority over soldiers—and therefore, responsibility—as the horse robbery incident shows.

Due to all these problems, both soldiers and friars have been leaving Texas. Nonetheless, in spite of the problems, Mazanet lists a number of reasons why they cannot abandon the land and stop evangelizing the natives. First, if the Spaniards leave now, re-gaining the Indians' trust when they return will not be easy ("si una vez los dejamos

no será fácil el que otra vez crean en los que entraren.” Second, if they leave and some other Spanish explorers come back later, they are likely to find that the Indians have hidden themselves because they have become fearful of the Spanish (“si desamparamos todos la tierra, cuando vuelvan otra vez los españoles no han de hallar indios en toda la tierra, porque cuando ellos no salieren a pelear, por lo menos se esconderán”). And last, the Native Americans will end up believing what the French have told them, that the Spaniards are not their friends and want to kill them all: “que los españoles querían matar a todos los indios, que ya no eran sus amigos” (“Carta al Virrey, 1692” 265).

In 1693 Count de Galve, Viceroy of New Spain, sent reinforcements to the missions, along with a letter to Mazanet, asking him to submit a report about the state of the Texas missions. Mazanet’s report, the main object of the present study, is dated the same year and is titled “Informe al Excelentísimo Señor Conde de Galve, Virrey de esta Nueva España,” herein referred to as “Report to the Viceroy”⁶. This text, arguably his most important and interesting letter, is divided into two parts. The first one gives him an opportunity to express his dissatisfaction with the lack of desire of many Amerindians to accept the Catholic faith. He has ten complaints to share with the viceroy. The second part is composed of three recommendations to improve the situations outlined in the first part. I will cover the complaints one by one, due to their importance, and will then analyze them.

Mazanet first complains that the natives around the mission of San Francisco de los Texas have not wanted to congregate and attend Catholic activities such as catechism, prayers, and mass: “no han querido juntarse, ni asistir a la doctrina cristiana, ni oír rezar”

(313). As part of the conversion of Indians, it was customary for them to “be ‘reduced’ to mission life and made to ‘congregate’ around a mission built among the Indians for their religious instruction. A presidio manned by Spanish soldiers would be established nearby to protect the priests and the local tribes from enemies” (F.Smith 16). In this case, even after promising to move, the Amerindians refused to do it, and also refused to attend church (314).

The second and third grievances are linked to one another and pertain to baptism:

(a) Shamans advise their fellow tribesmen not to get baptized lest the water kill them. In spite of the falsity of such beliefs, Mazanet affirms, Indians persevere in their believing it: (“aunque muchos que ya se estaban muriendo, después de haber recibido el agua del bautismo, no murieron, no por eso se quieren desengañar, sino que están ciegos en sus errores).” Also, (b) many Amerindians refuse to give their baptized relatives a Christian burial and, instead, they bury them according to their own rituals (“los entierran en el campo, según sus ceremonias”) and follow the tradition of leaving them food and other articles for the afterlife: “poner dentro de la sepultura comida y otras cosas, de que ellos usan, porque dicen que van a otra tierra; así el cuerpo como el alma” (313). Both the lack of baptism and absence of Christian burial are seen as intolerable because they show idolatrous beliefs.

Fourth, he laments that Native Americans do not want to believe in the Christian god. This is one of his graver complaints, since it goes straight to the main Catholic beliefs and the purposes of missionary work. Amerindians assert that the Spanish god gives the Spaniards clothes, knives, hatchets and hoes (“los españoles tienen un Dios que les da ropa, cuchillos, hachas, azadas y todo lo demás”). On the other hand, Indians

describe their own god as one that gives them foods from the soil and water for their fields (“que les da maíz, frijoles, nueces, bellota, y demás cosas del campo, con agua para los sembrados”) and that heaven was made by their forefathers and put on top of a high mountain: “el cielo lo hicieron sus antepasados, y para ello pusieron un cerro muy grande, que dicen está más tierra adentro de los cadodachos, y que cogieron la mitad de la tierra y la pusieron allá arriba; y que eso es el cielo” (313). These assertions show how the Texas Indians saw both their gods and the Christian god as providers, in which case they were already provided for, and did not have a need for any other deity.

Mazanet’s fifth grievance regards the pragmatic demand of Native Americans for Spaniards to help them against their own enemies: “si todos no vamos con ellos a la guerra y a matar sus enemigos, que nos volvamos a nuestra tierra” (313). In fact, having heard of the Spanish soldiers even before they met them, “the Caddos certainly reasoned that the Spanish would be very valuable allies to have, not only for the goods they could provide, but also for the amount of protection they might afford” (F. Smith 16). In the end, such protection did not happen, thus leaving the Indians disappointed.

As the sixth complaint, Mazanet tells the viceroy that on several occasions in which he has called on the army captain to tell the Native Americans to come to catechism, they tell him that they feel deceived in all respects (“que en todo los engañamos”), and behave with such disdain towards Spaniards that, lest they see any monetary convenience to it, they will not give away anything (314).

Complaint number seven has to do with the nature of Amerindians. Here Mazanet informs the viceroy that friars entered the territory almost four years previously and, in that time, Indians not only have refused to convert, but on different occasions have tried

to kill them, be it because of their evil nature or of covetousness of Spanish possessions: “o por su mal natural o por codicia de lo que tenemos” (314). As an example of this, he adds that in the previous year of 1692 the Guatsas Indians of the coast, helped by the Texas, had stolen their horses and killed their cattle. The sixth and seventh complaints fit into the long tradition of Amerindian behavioral demonization seen before in chronicles such as Cabeza de Vaca’s *Naufragios*, where we are also shown the Amerindians as drunkards and thieves⁷.

The eighth dissatisfaction is a practical cost-benefit analysis of the situation: Mazanet states that even if the Texas Indians are good, it would be extremely expensive to support the missions and soldiers: “en suposición de que estos indios fueran buenos, no se podrán costear los excesivos gastos que su Majestad tiene por tierra, para poder socorrer estas misiones y soldados.” Mazanet goes on to say that experience shows him that this land does not lend itself to sowing due to lack of water and good pasture, and because of storms that are not conducive to keeping cattle and horses: “la experiencia nos ha enseñado que esta tierra no es para sementeras, por no haber riego y los temporales no son ciertos para ganado, y caballada es menester traer todos los años de afuera, porque los pastos son malos y las aguas delgadas” (314). In other words, it is time to abandon such arid, unproductive land, regardless of the benefits of Christianizing.

The ninth section claims that in order to look for good land to populate, it will be necessary to remove the Indians out of their lands: “buscar parajes a propósito para poblaciones, se sigue el que los indios hayan de salir de su tierra.” This, however, does not work with the Texas Indians because, even though during the previous year the Indians had given the friars their word that they would organize their houses in the form

of a pueblo [around the mission], they did not comply: “que harían todas sus casas juntas en forma de pueblo, cuando llegó el mes de noviembre y diciembre, que hicieron muchas casas nuevas, no quisieron mudarse.” The reason for their refusal to move, according to Mazanet, is because they neither want to be close to the Spanish nor attend catechism, due to the disdain they hold against the Spaniards: “por no estar cerca de nosotros ni tener ocasión de que los juntásemos para la doctrina, porque lo mismo es ver a uno de nosotros en sus casas que ponernos mala cara” (314). This complaint is partly a continuation of the first one, the refusal to be ‘reduced.’

The tenth complaint is that, while missionaries provide good examples for the Native Americans, the soldiers do the opposite, such as taking the Indian women for themselves:

que pretenden por una parte los religiosos la conversión de sus almas, dándoles en todo buen ejemplo, y por otra parte los soldados dan mal ejemplo, descalabrando cada nonada indios, por sus mujeres” (314).

In previous letters Mazanet had complained about the bad example and abusive behavior of such soldiers (e.g., in the abovementioned 1692 letter to the viceroy).

After finishing his ten points, Mazanet gives three suggestions for dealing with the situation, but not before expressing his disillusionment and lack of optimism about it. He states that the situation will not end productively, and that all the King’s expenditures will ultimately be a loss of time, having nothing for which to show:

No me parece que por este camino se podrá conseguir fruto alguno, sino que será empezar por dónde [sic] otros acaban. Y después de muchos gastos que Su majestad habrá tenido, no se conseguirá el fruto que se

pretende, y habrá sido todo un entretenimiento y haber empatado el tiempo.

(314-15)

Thus, he asserts that what is needed in order for these Native Americans to become Christians is for them to live together and closeby, to look for other more appropriate lands, which will probably be found far away, and to have soldiers force them to attend church: (a) “Que haya fuerza de soldados, que forzados sólo serán,” (b) “buscar parajes al propósito y esos se hallarán muy lejos,” and (c) “el que vivan juntos y no como ahora, que están muy desparramados” (315). None of these measures worked and, unable to subdue the Texas Indians, Mazanet ultimately abandoned Texas in 1694.

Mazanet’s stance had a negative response. The editor of the letter in question, Lino Gómez Canedo, notes that it was harshly criticized by others, such as the prosecutor Juan de Escalante y Mendoza, who stated that this conversion by the force was not in agreement with Catholic theology: that this “proposición de violencia y fuerza de armas para la conversión de estos bárbaros a nuestra santa fe, por no conforme a buena teología ni disposiciones de sagrados concilios” (315, n. 8).

A few conclusions become obvious upon a reading of this letter against the grain. First, in the process of trying to justify his treatment of the Amerindians and his reasons for abandoning them, Mazanet strips Amerindians of their essence as separate human beings by virtue of seeing them as an *Other*. This *Other* is either perceived, in line with Tzvetan Todorov, as somebody without a proper religion and form of government, or, on the other hand, as a being with enough rationality to be converted. In any case, by virtue of their alterity, they are deprived of the essence as separate and worthy enough human beings (Todorov 146-67).

Therefore, Mazanet thinks of Amerindians as beings with bare life (barely human, or “a kind of bestialization of man”) (Agamben “Homo Sacer” 3) upon which he can request from the sovereign or simply grant himself a state of exception (a state of emergency) (Agamben “State of Exception” 4). This would allow him the permission to subvert Philip II’s 1573 law--*Ordenanzas sobre descubrimiento, nueva población y pacificación de las Indias*--prohibiting the abuse of native Americans (500 años de México en documentos, siglo XVI). This would give Mazanet the permission to implement bio-power (bio-political) techniques—techniques utilized to control human populations (Foucault 140-144)—, such as the reorganization of Indian communities around the mission and the presidio, the removal from their lands in search of more fertile ones, and the conversion of Natives Americans by force.

It is interesting, however, that while Mazanet intends to strip the Texas Indians of their essence, his own description of them let us see them, almost in spite of Mazanet himself, as beings with agency more than mere subjects. They have learnt of Spanish deceit and covetousness and now they have taken a proactive attitude. They refuse to go to war with the Spaniards unless they kill their own Amerindian enemies. They do not accept relocation. They are not willing to accept the Christian god, get baptized, go to church, or be buried as Christians. They have understood the Spanish lust for money, and they refuse to do anything except for monetary interest. They do not only spurn the friars’ evangelizing intents, but have even tried to kill them.

In the end, the refusal of the Texas Indians to comply with Mazanet’s orders have a contradictory effect and let us see—clearer than in many other Colonial chronicles— (a) the mechanisms by which a sense of alterity and superiority may led to the

irrational assertion of bio-power and other hard measures, and (b) how, in the end, it all fails once the oppressed Amerindians stop seeing themselves as subjects and turn into agents of their own interest.

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Notes

1 For more information, please refer to: (a) Tzvetan Todorov's *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* 146-67; (b) John Mowitt's foreword to Paul Smith's *Discerning the Subject* ix-xxii; and (c) Giorgio Agamben's books, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Human Life*¹⁻¹², and *State of Exception* 1-31.

2 New Spain included Mexico, the American Southwest, Eastern and Western Florida, most of Central America and, at a certain point in history, the Spanish Greater Antilles. The American Southwest and Northern Mexico were called the Northern Territories.

3 Karankawa Indians: Fierce warriors who lived along the Gulf of Mexico, from West Galveston Island to Corpus Christie (Moore).

4 Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, as a chronicler, had an interest in the colonization of Texas. Sigüenza took part in the Pensacola expedition in 1693, which also had the purpose of eradicating the French from the Gulf of Mexico (Gómez Canedo 5).

5 Guatsas, Caddo, and Texas Indians: "The status of the Guasa (Guaser, Guaza, Guesa, Huasa) Indians in Texas is far from clear. In a Spanish missionary report of 1691 a group identified as Guaza was reported as living about eighty leagues southwest of the Hasinai Caddos. This name did not appear again in documents until the second half of the eighteenth century, when the Guasa Indians were identified

as enemies of the Comanches and also as trading with various Indian groups in northeastern Texas. These Guasa Indians seem to have been the Osage Indians, who at that time were ranging from western Missouri into eastern Kansas and Oklahoma. At present it is not possible to link the Guazas of 1691 with the Guasas of the late eighteenth century.” Caddo Indians: “The Caddo were farmers who lived in East Texas. There were two main groups of the Caddo in Texas. One major Caddo tribe was the Kadohadacho. The Kadohadacho lived in large villages along the Red River near the present day Oklahoma-Arkansas border. The other was the Tejas or Hasinai Caddo who lived around present day Nacogdoches...The Hasinai were made up of several tribes organized into a confederacy. They called the confederacy the Tejas. Tejas is the Spanish spelling of the Caddo word and it is pronounced Te-haas. Sound familiar? TEXAS!!! Yup, Texas is a Caddoan word. It means ‘those who are friends’” (Moore).

6 All citations involving Mazanet’s complaints and solutions are from the 1693 “Report to His Excellency the Count of Galve, Viceroy of This New Spain” (herein referred to as “Report to the Viceroy”). Therefore, only page numbers will be parenthetically referenced in the discussion of this letter.

7 For more details on demonization, please refer to my article “The Double Discourse of Indian Mythicizing in Cabeza de Vaca’s *Naufraios*.” This essay studies, among other subjects, the Spanish characterization of the Amerindians in terms of sins that would ultimately trace back to the influence of demons on them, such as “homosexuality, robbery, lying, drunkenness, and assassination of newborn girls, who were fed to dogs to avoid their mating with enemy tribes” (27).