

Literary Club Budget
September 24, 2018
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Superlatives

Doctrine of Discovery: The Best and Worst of Times

The inspiration for this paper and the theme of this Budget -"Superlatives"- came as I was reading about the humbling and horridly violent history of Christianity. When I came to discussions of the so-called Doctrine of Discovery, I thought, 'That is one of the worst things I have ever heard of'. I want to tell you about the early impact on the New World of the Doctrine of Discovery as seen through the eyes of a Spanish teenage boy who was in the crew of the *Santa Maria* sailing with Christopher Columbus on his first voyage to the New World. And through the eyes of a teenage Taino girl who witnessed the arrival and invasion of the Spaniards into her world.

From the Memoir of Miguel Ocampos

"My name is Miguel Ocampos. I am writing this memoir in 1527 at age fifty. But in 1492, when I was age fifteen, I had the good fortune to join the crew of the *Santa Maria* as a gromet or ship's boy. The *Santa Maria*, along with two smaller but faster ships, the *Pinta* and the *Nina*, were under the leadership of Captain General Christopher Columbus.

Columbus had tried for many years to get sponsorship to journey west in search of a sea passage to the spice trade in the East Indies and, hopefully, to China and Japan, which were rumored to hold many other riches. Finally the Spanish monarchs, Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand, agreed to underwrite such an expedition. They agreed to give Columbus the rank 'Admiral of the Ocean Sea', appoint him Viceroy and Governor of all new lands he could claim for Spain and entitle him to ten percent in perpetuity of all the revenues from the new lands.

I was curious about why, after all the years that Columbus had spent seeking sponsorship from various monarchs and wealthy patrons, did Ferdinand and Isabella decide to back him in his adventure.

Timing seems to have been important. In 1492 Europe was in quite a mess. The

fifteenth century was drawing to a close and many felt the end of the world was near. It was a time of great anxiety and pessimism. There were terrifying predictions of armageddon. Death and destruction were taken quite seriously at all levels of society. In my own village church there were paintings and frescoes depicting scenes of writhing and agonizing bodies condemned to death and damnation

Violence was a part of everyday life in Europe. Torture and execution were spectator entertainment. The violence of the Church sponsored Inquisitions was most prominent and brutal in the Spanish Inquisition.

Disease in the form of bubonic plague, small pox, measles and tuberculosis plagued Europe in epidemic proportions. Savonarola preached in 1496 in Florence , “There will not be enough men left to bury the dead; nor means to dig the graves“.

Famine was a constant threat to the general population. There was a Spanish proverb “If the lark flies over Castile, she must take her grain of barley with her.” Hundreds of thousands died of starvation on a regular basis.

So it was into these conditions of ongoing famine, disease, violence at many levels, preoccupation with death and growing anxiety about the end of the world that Ferdinand and Isabella seemed to be saying, ‘We have to take measures to improve the economics and hope of our new nation-state of Spain’.

Some exploration of unknown lands was already going on. Portugal was sailing south along the coast of Africa and investigating what opportunities might lie there for trade, gold and slaves; as well as claiming “discovered” lands for themselves. Ferdinand and Isabella seemed to think they should be using a similar strategy.

This was enabled by some Papal documents, the first being the bull *Romanus Pontifex* issued in 1455 by Pope Nicholas V. The document states in part that the Christian kings of Europe may:

invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens (Muslims) and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery..... and to convert them to their use and profit.

This statement serves as the basis for what is commonly called the Doctrine of Discovery, the teaching that whatever Christians “discover” they can take and use as they wish.

We sailed from Spain in August, 1492 with a stop in the Canary Islands for restocking and repairs; then a five week voyage west across the ocean sea. On October 12, 1492 a lookout spotted land; though Columbus maintained he had already seen a light on land a few hours earlier, which allowed him to claim a lifetime pension as the first person to sight land. I mention this because I think it characterizes many of Columbus’ actions for the remainder of this voyage and later voyages. He frequently altered the truth, as I and most of my shipmates saw it, when the alteration put him in a better light or enriched him or gave him more power.

Our first landing was probably in the Bahama Islands. We planted a flag; thereby claiming the land as a Spanish possession. We continued that practice of planting flags and claiming possession for Spain as we explored the coast of Cuba and Hispaniola. Columbus presumed these lands were not already possessed, despite the fact that at every landing we were greeted by groups of persons whom he called the “naked people”

These are some of the early descriptions of the “naked people” which Columbus wrote in his journal:

They all go around as naked as their mother bore them; and the women too....

They are very well built, with very handsome bodies and very good faces.

They have no iron. They bear no arms, nor are they acquainted with them, for I showed them swords and they grasped them by the blade and cut themselves through ignorance.

They ought to be good servants and of good intelligence.

At no point did the “naked people” show resistance. They gave us gifts and food and seemed very curious about us. We gave them small trinkets such as glass beads which they hung around their necks. They were very pleased and very friendly. After a few

days Columbus had to admit that we had not reached China. So he said obstinately, "Then it must be India", and began to call these people Indians.

We had been told that the purpose of our dealings with any native people was to convert them to Christianity. There were even some priests in our party, presumably to assist with the conversions. But early on, it became clear that Columbus intended to enslave and not to convert these native people."

Thus ends the memoir of Miquel Ocampos

Who were these "naked people"? They called themselves Taino. Columbus had initially called them "Indians"; a name which stuck. We turn now to the oral history of a Taino woman, Heitiana, who was thirteen years old in 1492 when she and her villagers first saw Columbus, his ships and the crews of clothed, armed, white skinned men. The Taino had no written language, so oral history was their tradition. Heitiana was a carrier of the history and one of the few Taino survivors. Years later, a Spanish Dominican Friar Bartolome de las Casas, who had befriended Heitiana, became her scribe and wrote down all she knew and could remember about her people and her experiences.

From Heitiana's Memoir

"The Taino are descendants of Arawaks from South America. We had inhabited many Caribbean islands but around the early 1300s my people fled to the Bahamas, Hispaniola, Cuba, Jamaica, the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico to escape the cannibalistic and warlike Carib tribes. There we lived peaceful lives; farming, fishing

and hunting in harmony with our natural surroundings. Our primary foods were yuca for cassava bread, yams and various squashes. We had bows and arrows for hunting and fishing and protecting ourselves from occasional raids by the Caribs. We lived in groups of villages of varying size. Each group of villages was headed by a Cacique or chieftain. Families were matrilineal. We believed in a spirit world and consulted certain spirits for guidance. Though our language had no written form, some Taino words became incorporated into European languages; such as canoe, hammock, barbecue, tobacco and hurricane. We made oceangoing dugout canoes that could transport up to one hundred people.

When Christopher Columbus and his three ships appeared in our bay, we didn't know

what to think. We had never seen anything like them or their ships. Even though it was nearly always warm, they wore cloth over all of their bodies. And their skin was white and hairy. There were no women in their group. We welcomed and gave them gifts and food, as was our custom for visitors. At first they seemed friendly also. But it soon became clear that they regarded us as uncivilized savages and they began to order us to do their bidding. We tried but if we couldn't do it fast enough or well enough, they became angry and hurt us with their swords and guns.

They began to take men and women onto their ships where they locked them up and said they would take them away to their homeland. The men took women and girls to have sex with them. We became their servants and slaves. They began torturing and killing us in large numbers for no apparent reason that we could see. Sometimes it seemed like a sport to them. Years later I was told that when Columbus' first voyage arrived in October, 1492, there were three hundred thousand Taino on my island of Hispaniola. Four years later there were two hundred thousand. More and more Spaniards kept coming and more and more Tainos kept dying. Many starved to death because they couldn't raise their crops. Then diseases brought by the Europeans began to kill Tainos by the hundreds of thousands. We had no resistance to their smallpox, measles, tuberculosis and many other diseases. Years later, I heard a story that the Spaniards may have taken the disease of syphilis back to Europe from the Tainos. Our only revenge.

The priest, Father Bartolome, tells me that even though Columbus' expeditions came with the stated mission of converting souls to Christianity, there was very little effort to do so. "Instead", he said, "I would say that our mission in the New World is fourfold: finding new lands, conquering them, finding gold and Christianizing savages, in that exact order. To most Spaniards, Tainos were savages; animals who had no souls to convert."

In 1548, an exhaustive census by Spanish clergy could turn up only 490 Taino on Hispaniola. Our people were extinct on many of the islands long before that. It is estimated that some three million souls, 85% of the entire Taino population, had vanished by the early 1500s.. Later, many of those left intermarried with Spaniards and Africans to be known as "mestizos."

This ends Heitiana's memoir.

Columbus' explorations marked the beginning of the European discovery of the New World. Conquering the New World brought relief and hope and wealth to Europe. Ironically, many of the very circumstances in Europe - violence, famine, disease, death - that motivated Ferdinand and Isabella to underwrite Columbus' expeditions were a legacy that Columbus and others after him brought to the indigenous peoples of the New World.

The concepts of the Doctrine of Discovery continued to be used by white Europeans throughout North and South America, Africa, Asia and Australia during the period of colonialism. They remain a major tenant of our American legal system. In the 1832 case of Johnson v. M'Intosh, Chief Justice John Marshall opined that the United States, upon winning its independence in 1776, became the successor nation to the right of 'discovery' and acquired the power of dominion from Great Britain. Therefore, all Native American land claims are null and void. As recently as 2005, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg cited the Doctrine of Discovery in rejecting land claims by the Oneida Native American tribe.

The Doctrine of Discovery marked the beginning of the best of times for Christopher Columbus, his Spanish patrons, most of Europe and European settlers in the New World. For the Taino people and many other indigenous peoples, it marked the beginning of the worst of times. It is perhaps fitting to consider these contrasts as two weeks from today, October 8th, we observe both Columbus Day and Indigenous People's Day.

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