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# FROM THE EDITORS

Two years ago, a handful of Brown history students came together in shared admiration of the outstanding historical scholarship produced by their undergraduate peers, and with a commitment to creating a space in which this work could be shared with the entire University community. The efforts of these students culminated in the publication of the first issue of the *Brown Journal of History*. Most of them graduated soon afterwards, hopeful that younger students would continue the endeavor they had begun.

This spring, the publication of the journal's third issue demonstrates that the spirit behind its mission continues to thrive. We can say with confidence that the journal has by now secured a place in undergraduate academic life.

Of course, the journal could never have been brought to life, or sustained, without the support and enthusiasm it has received from faculty members, graduate students, administrators, and donors across campus. This collaboration remains essential to the *Journal's* success.

As in the past, the response to this year's call for submissions was immense and enthusiastic; once again, our editorial board faced the challenge of narrowing a pool of 100 submissions to a final set of six. In keeping with our commitment to cross-disciplinary dialogue, we expanded our efforts to solicit submissions that reflect the broad diversity of historical scholarship conducted on this campus, both within the Department of History and beyond it.

The six papers published in this issue reflect the wide range of interests and the variety of approaches that Brown students bring to the practice of history. The contents of these papers span four continents, range in topic from food history to the history of medicine and everything in between, and touch on issues of race, gender, class, religion, and culture.

In keeping with our original aim to facilitate exchange between faculty and students, we have introduced a series of interviews with faculty members about their recent publications. Just as the journal looks to recognize undergraduates as historians in their own right, we hope to encourage faculty to share their academic interests with students and offer insight into the challenges and rewards of practicing history.

With gratitude for the continued interest of our peers and the generous support of our university, and with pride in the accomplishments of our classmates, we present to you the third issue of the *Brown Journal of History*.

Caitlin Browne  
Hillary Taylor  
Spring 2009

# “NO HAY TAL COSA EN EL MUNDO”

HOW MESOAMERICAN  
CHOCOLATE COLONIZED THE WORLD, 1519 - 1825

BY SAMUEL BYKER

*Samuel Byker uses the history of chocolate to illustrate the complexities of cultural exchange and to question traditional narratives of conquest and colonization in the early Atlantic world.*

In 1519, at the palace of Emperor Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin in the Aztec capital city of Tenochtitlan, conquistador Bernal Díaz del Castillo joined in a lavish banquet. Decades later, as he looked back on the event from peaceful retirement in Guatemala, one aspect stood out: though Motecuhzoma ate only frugally from the 300 dishes prepared for the gathering, he partook throughout the meal of a beverage made of cacao beans and spices, served in cups of gold by beautiful women, with much ceremony.<sup>1</sup> At the time, Motecuhzoma's drink—cacahuatl, or chocolate as it came to be called by the Spanish<sup>2</sup>—was a strange sight, lacking any equivalent in Old World civilization, and some Spaniards who tried the beverage were disgusted by its bitter taste and scum-like consistency. After the Empire had fallen, however, many of them began to consume it with as much devotion—if not in as large a quantity—as Motecuhzoma and his court.

As the Spanish consolidated their hold on Mesoamerica over the next several decades, cacao consolidated its hold on them. Conquistadores and their wives began drinking cacao beverages using the same techniques, ingredients, and drinking implements the Aztecs had pioneered, and soon many could not get through the day without it. By the turn of the seventeenth century, chocolate consumption was universal among whites in New Spain, and had made inroads into Spanish societies

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<sup>1</sup> Sophie D. and Michael D. Coe, *The True History of Chocolate* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 94.

<sup>2</sup> Cacao remained a beverage until modern chocolate bars were first created in 1847. Thus, for the scope of this paper “chocolate” will refer to a drink made of water and roasted cacao, with any number of other ingredients mixed in. (Coe, 243.)

in both Iberia and the Viceroyalty of Perú.<sup>3</sup> Several decades later, it had spread throughout northern Europe as well.

Traditionally, historians have viewed the colonization of Latin America as a process in which European invaders destroyed the cultures of societies they conquered. According to this narrative, native peoples were coerced into adopting European religions, customs, and languages, while their resources were plundered and sent to the Old World. Culture flowed West across the Atlantic, while goods sailed East. When an Irishman ate a potato, he did so without any connection to the Andean culture that had domesticated the root centuries before.

In the case of chocolate, however, I will argue that something very different occurred. The beverage consumed in Spanish palaces and Italian monasteries more than two centuries after the conquest remained remarkably close to genuine Aztec chocolate in its presentation, preparation, and taste. Somehow, the culture surrounding cacao in central Mexico stuck to the bean as it entered creole homes in New Spain and was stowed away in cargo holds as cacao crossed the Atlantic. As a result, chocolate consumption became one of the few genuine cultural connections between Europeans and pre-conquest Mesoamerican elites.

Simultaneously, chocolate's economic web — already highly developed under the Aztecs — broadened, and the cacao trade became another force tying Europe to the New World, and New Spain to South America. As the creole-fueled chocolate craze grew, unsustainable demands by Spanish bureaucrats in the late sixteenth century combined with massive demographic crises to cause a short-lived cacao boom that soon went bust, leaving many former centers of cacao cultivation crippled and barren. Production shifted initially to Ecuador and Venezuela. Later, as other European powers scrambled for a piece of the lucrative cacao trade, plantations sprang up in Dutch Curaçao, French Martinique, British Jamaica, and Portuguese Brazil. Production then began to fuel consumption, as European powers began importing the bean and entrepreneurs sought to profit by convincing the populace of chocolate's merits. Still, the exchange flowed both ways: as chocolate went out of fashion in Europe, its use fell among whites in the Americas as well. And as cacao became de-sacralized, its special place in native culture and cuisine disappeared.

By the eighteenth century, Europeans would have been shocked at the assertion that by drinking chocolate they had adopted Aztec culture. They insisted that cacao was brought over for its beneficial medical properties, or that it had been uplifted from a vile Aztec concoction and altered to fit a more civilized palate. I will attempt to show, however, that those justifications were developed after the fact by European writers advocating chocolate and creoles trying to combat allegations that they had been degraded by associating with indigenous culture. In fact, the chocolate served in Europe into the nineteenth century still had strong roots in preparations developed by pre-conquest Aztecs. I argue that the spread of Mesoamerican chocolate revealed the contradictions inherent in colonialist ideology and the complexity of cultural exchanges between natives, creoles, and Europeans in the colonial-era Atlantic world.

## CACAO AND ITS HABITAT, C. 1519

The cacao tree — dubbed *Theobroma cacao*, or “food of the gods,” by Linnaeus — is a

small, shade-loving, understory tree that grows only within 20 degrees of the equator at altitudes below 2000 ft. Cacao's unique biological feature — and the reason it warrants historical, rather than simply botanical, study — is the set of pods as large as footballs, ranging in color from yellow to dark green to red, that grow directly from the trunk of each mature tree. The pods hold cacao's small, bean-shaped seeds in a mass of sweet, white pulp, and it is the pulp that has drawn mammals to the tree for the better part of its existence.

Several native cultures in the rainforests of South America — where the tree is believed to have originated — eat the pods as most Westerners would papaya, discarding the skin and seeds while consuming the flesh. Many also ferment the pulp with water to create a citrusy, slightly caffeinated alcoholic beverage. For millennia, however, anthropologists believe that no culture south of the Isthmus of Panama ever did more than simply discard the seeds, perhaps spitting them out with disgust at their bitter, astringent, and thoroughly unappealing flavor.<sup>4</sup>

In Mesoamerica, however, north of the Cordillera de Talamanca, the story was far different. To the Aztecs (Mexica), Maya, and other cultures, the seeds were not only the most valuable part of the cacao pod: they were one of the most expensive, sought-after, and revered commodities available. A thousand years before the Columbus set foot in the New World, Mesoamerican cultures drank beverages made from roasted, ground cacao nibs (as the dried, husked seeds are called), and in the intervening millennium the drink's creation had been elevated to an art form.<sup>5</sup>

When Díaz del Castillo arrived in Tenochtitlan, the city lay at the heart of a vast and powerful civilization. Through an alliance with neighboring states Texcoco and Tlacopan, Motecuhzoma ruled an empire of trade and conquest that encompassed more than five million people in what is now central and southern Mexico.<sup>6</sup> Tenochtitlan's royal palace received a steady stream of tribute goods from the farthest reaches of Mesoamerica, and among the most prized was the cacao bean. Spanish chronicler Francisco Cervantes de Salazar wrote that Motecuhzoma's imperial warehouse held 960,000,000 of them; though that figure is probably an exaggeration, the real number must have been staggering. Díaz del Castillo wrote that more than 2000 *jícaras* (gourds) of chocolate were delivered each day to the soldiers of Motecuhzoma's guard alone.<sup>7</sup> Chocolate consumption was limited to the rich, powerful, and most respected members of the empire: nobles, long-distance merchants, and warriors.

All of the more than twenty drinks the Aztecs made from cacao started the same way. Dried, fermented beans — such as those in the emperor's storehouse — were toasted over a fire, winnowed to remove their husks, and selected individually by hand. Those nibs that made the cut would be placed on a *metate* (*metatl* to the Aztecs), a stone heated from below, and ground with another stone until they formed a thick paste, which would then be mixed into water. (In most cases, this paste would be hardened into tablets, which could then be melted to make chocolate at a later date.) The defining features of each chocolate recipe, however, were the things added to the drink. Seeds, fruit, chilies, maize, and honey were all popular additions, but the most prized ingredients were three flowers: *Xochinacatzli* (“ear flowers,” which tasted like black pepper), *Mecaxóchitl* (reminiscent of anise), and *Tlixochitl* (vanilla).

<sup>4</sup> Allen M. Young, *The Chocolate Tree: A Natural History of Cacao* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 14-18.

<sup>5</sup> Coe, *True History*, 36-43.

<sup>6</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, “Aztec,” 2008.

<sup>7</sup> Coe, *True History*, 84-85.

The beverage could be served hot or cold.<sup>8</sup>

Though cacao use by commoners was frowned upon, demand from the upper-classes was so strong and consistent that peoples throughout Mesoamerica viewed the bean as having a guaranteed value. Since cacao was also small, durable, and spoiled slowly, in the centuries prior to conquest it became the primary medium of exchange in Mesoamerican trade. In Tlaxcala, according to an oft-cited Nahuatl document from 1545, a single bean could purchase a tomato or a tamale. A large salamander might warrant four, while a good turkey hen would bring 100.<sup>9</sup> Cacao's use continued through conquest. "Everything is bought cheap with cacao, however expensive or cheap, such as gold, slaves, clothing, things to eat and everything else," Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdes wrote of sixteenth century Nicaragua. "There are public women... who yield themselves to whomever they like for ten cacao beans."<sup>10</sup>

The Mexican Plateau was far too high, dry, and cold for cacao to grow, which meant that every bean in Motecuhzoma's daily chocolate regimen had to be imported from hundreds of miles to the South. The Aztecs obtained cacao through both tribute and trade, attracting it from the farthest reaches of Mesoamerica, but demand always outstripped available supplies, forcing the empire to go to extraordinary lengths to fulfill its cacao habit. The tree's prevalence in Soconusco, a coastal region in what is now Chiapas, was likely a major factor in the Aztec conquest of the region in the late fifteenth century.<sup>11</sup> Cacao's scarcity and resultant value reinforced its standing as a sign of wealth, power, and elite status.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, as Sophie and Michael Coe point out, "Each time an Aztec took a drink of chocolate from the brightly painted gourd cups in which it was served, he was, so to speak, drinking real money; the only equivalent to this in our own culture would be to light one's cigar with a twenty-dollar bill."<sup>13</sup>

## SPANISH COLONISTS

European civilization first encountered cacao on August 15, 1502, when Christopher Columbus, sailing through the Southwestern Caribbean on his fourth voyage to the New World, came across a Maya trading canoe filled with garments, metal tools, and a large number of small brown things, which Columbus's son dubbed "almonds." "They seemed to hold these almonds at a great price," he wrote of the Maya, "for when they were brought on board ship together with their goods, I observed that when any of these almonds fell, they all stooped to pick it up, as if an eye had fallen."<sup>14</sup> The vessel was captured, and its goods brought onboard, but there the record ceases. The first expedition to get its hands on Mesoamerica's most prized commodity likely discarded it.

Hernán Cortés and his men were the first to learn how Mesoamericans used the valuable beans after they landed in Veracruz in 1519. As they made their way to

Tenochtitlan, the conquistadores found that their indigenous servants would accept wages in cacao; one post-conquest source put a porter's daily wage at 100 beans.<sup>15</sup> Along the way they also may well have been offered chocolate by village leaders, as the region's traditional customs dictated for visiting men of power.<sup>16</sup> By the time of Díaz del Castillo's banquet, it was likely that Cortés and the members of his expedition fully understood the value of chocolate and perhaps even its preparation.

Initially, the conquistadores' attitudes toward chocolate were shaped mostly by its economic value. After the death of Motecuhzoma and the Aztec empire's collapse, the Spanish tried to maintain its revenue while minimizing transitional problems by demanding the same tribute the Aztecs had from each region of the empire. In 1548 the Soconusco region, in modern-day Chiapas, still sent 200 cargoes of cacao to Tenochtitlan each year — exactly what it had paid in Aztec times.<sup>17</sup> Though the Monarquía Española sought to ban many sacred Aztec foods (including amaranth and psychotropic mushrooms),<sup>18</sup> it refrained from doing so for cacao.<sup>19</sup> Chocolate had been used in many Aztec rituals, including marriage ceremonies, and was even mixed with human blood and fed to sacrificial victims. Still, Catholic clergy not only permitted cacao use but often consumed the beverage themselves, and some even incorporated it into worship. The main cathedral in Mexico City, built next to the site of the Aztecs' great Templo Mayor, housed a sculpture dubbed "Christ of the Cacao," at which Christianized natives left offerings of cacao beans—just as they might have paid tribute at the Templo Mayor decades earlier.<sup>20</sup> Each night priests could remove the beans from around the sculpture — just as one might clean a coin-filled wishing well — and either pocket the haul themselves or add it to the church coffers. In a very real sense, cacao was money, and the Spanish demonstrated repeatedly that they would rather possess than prohibit it.

At first, however, many Spaniards expressed disgust for chocolate as a beverage. Girolamo Benzoni, who encountered it in Nicaragua in the mid-sixteenth century, wrote that it "seemed more a drink for pigs, than a drink for humanity. I was in this country for more than one year, and never wanted to taste it."<sup>21</sup> Many Europeans, though — including the Mexico City elite — seem to have developed affection for the drink within two decades of conquest. The first recorded remarks on cacao by Catholic clergymen focused solely on its delicious flavor and refreshing qualities.<sup>22</sup> Díaz del Castillo's first reference to cacao use by whites tells of a 1538 Mexico City banquet, at which Spanish ladies were offered chocolate by their native servants while their husbands debauched in the city's Great Plaza.<sup>23</sup> Around the same time, the word chocolate came into being. Most Mexican scholars agree that the Nahuatl word *cacahuatl* ("cacao water") was replaced by *chocolatl* (from the Yucatec *chocol*, "hot," and the Nahuatl *atl*, "water"), which was Hispanicized into *chocolate*. But why? Sophie and Michael Coe make the interesting argument that the shift occurred because *caca* meant basically "shit" in Spanish, derived from the Latin *cacare*, "to defecate." They write: "It is hard to believe that the Spaniards were not thoroughly uncomfortable

<sup>8</sup> Marcy Norton, "Tasting Empire: Chocolate and the European Internationalization of Mesoamerican Aesthetics," *American Historical Review* (2006): 671-72.

<sup>9</sup> Coe, *True History*, 98.

<sup>10</sup> Young, *The Chocolate Tree*, 31.

<sup>11</sup> Janine Gasco, "Soconusco Cacao Farmers Past and Present: Continuity and Change in an Ancient Way of Life," in *Chocolate in Mesoamerica: A Cultural History of Cacao*, ed. Cameron L. McNeil (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 322.

<sup>12</sup> Cameron L. McNeil, "Introduction: The Biology, Antiquity, and Modern Uses of the Chocolate Tree (*Theobroma cacao* L.)," in *Chocolate in Mesoamerica: A Cultural History of Cacao*, ed. Cameron L. McNeil (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 12.

<sup>13</sup> Coe, *True History*, 99.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>15</sup> Manuel Aguilar-Moreno, "The Good and Evil of Chocolate in Colonial Mexico," in *Chocolate in Mesoamerica: A Cultural History of Cacao*, ed. Cameron L. McNeil (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 275.

<sup>16</sup> Norton, "Tasting Empire," 678.

<sup>17</sup> Gasco, "Soconusco Cacao Farmers," 327.

<sup>18</sup> Aguilar, "Good and Evil," 273.

<sup>19</sup> Beth Marie Forest and April L. Najjaj, "Is Sipping Sin Breaking Fast? The Catholic Chocolate Controversy and the Changing World of Early Modern Spain," *Food and Foodways* 15 (2007): 35.

<sup>20</sup> Aguilar, "Good and Evil," 276.

<sup>21</sup> Norton, "Tasting Empire," 668.

<sup>22</sup> Aguilar, "Good and Evil," 275.

<sup>23</sup> Coe, *True History*, 112.

with a noun beginning with *caca* to describe a thick, dark-brown drink which they had begun to appreciate.” If true, this argument demonstrates among other things that the Spanish were beginning to like the beverage, and to consume it with some frequency. A nation of Girolamo Benzoni would have had no problem referring to chocolate as “shit water;” one whose members drank it each morning might have felt differently.

Many academics have attempted to answer the question of why Europeans adopted chocolate. The simplest and most convincing answer is that it was the first source of caffeine that European colonists had been exposed to. In fact, chocolate was the first, and initially most popular, of the triumvirate of foreign caffeinated drinks that took Europe by storm in the Age of Reason. The other two, of course, were coffee and tea, both of which overtook chocolate in popularity during the eighteenth century.<sup>24</sup> However, since chocolate has significantly less caffeine by volume than its two competitors, I find it implausible that colonists adopted it solely as a vehicle for the stimulant. Rather, European colonists’ major reason for drinking chocolate — which they repeat time and time again in early sources — was simple: it was delicious. A century of modern science has offered us no more convincing explanation for the substance’s appeal.

But though Aztec chocolate appealed to European palates, it still had to gain a cultural foothold in order to achieve widespread popularity among whites. Historian Marcy Norton explained it this way:

Despite their position at the apex of the social hierarchy, colonists in sixteenth-century Mexico were enveloped within an Indian cultural milieu and were susceptible to native acculturation .... Spaniards learned to like chocolate because of their continued material dependence on Indians. Colonial spaces of dependence included households where women labored as wives, concubines, and servants. Cross-cultural contacts flourished in intimate settings, some voluntary, others coerced.<sup>25</sup>

One preparation in particular, called *xochiaya cacahuatl*, or “honeyed chocolate made with ground-up dried flowers,” became most popular among creoles. It contained the *xochinacaztl*, *mecaxóchitl*, and *tlixochitl* (vanilla) mentioned above, along with chilies and, most importantly, honey — or, in later years, sugar.<sup>26</sup> Sweeteners made chocolate more palatable and likely softened the jolt the concoction gave European taste buds, though many whites still took the beverage without them.

But regardless of how chocolate became popular, or the recipe that facilitated its widespread adoption, we know that its consumption was practically universal in New Spain by the 1590s.<sup>27</sup> As British author D. Quélus wrote of chocolate in his 1724 treatise on its natural history:

“All the European Colonies which are establish’d in [the New World] make a Consumption of vast Quantities of it: These People use it at all Times, and in all Seasons, as constant daily Food, without regard to Age, Sex, Temperament, or Condition.”<sup>28</sup>

## EUROPEAN METROPOLES

<sup>24</sup> Ross W. Jamieson, “The Essence of Commodification: Caffeine Dependencies in the Early Modern World,” *Journal of Social History* 35 (2001): 286.

<sup>25</sup> Norton, “Tasting Empire,” 676-677.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 672.

<sup>27</sup> Vara, “Origines,” 299.

<sup>28</sup> D. Quélus, *The Natural History of Chocolate* (J. Roberts, near the Oxford-Arms in Warwick-Lane, 1724), 45.

Chocolate’s first forays outside of Mesoamerica were made in the company of merchants, government officials, and members of religious orders, many of whom had developed a taste for the drink while stationed in New Spain and brought it with them to new postings in South America or homes in Iberia. Thus, chocolate spread first to the Viceroyalty of Perú and subsequently to Europe.<sup>29</sup> In Spain, religious orders and merchant guilds were the only major public consumers of chocolate in the sixteenth century. The first legal commercial shipment of cacao arrived in Seville from Veracruz in 1585, and it did not become a regular trade item until the next decade,<sup>30</sup> when it established a “significant presence” in Iberia for the first time.<sup>31</sup> In 1544, cacao entered the court of Charles I, when Dominican Friars brought a delegation of Kekchi Mayan nobles to visit Spain. In addition to 2000 quetzal feathers and a plethora of other gifts, they brought cacao beans and receptacles for chocolate.<sup>32</sup> Thus, chocolate was introduced directly from the elites of one culture to those of another — a fitting symbol, since cacao remained exclusive to the rich and powerful in Europe for the rest of the sixteenth century. By the early 1600s, the royal house had developed quite a habit: its annual request for tribute from the New World included 450kg of cacao beans, 50kg of vanilla, and 300kg of pasta de chocolate, or cakes of cacao paste.<sup>33</sup>

By the 1620s, cacao had spread northward in the hands of merchants and priests, but it had yet to gain a major cultural foothold anywhere outside Iberia.<sup>34</sup> In 1660, though, chocolate made a splash when it arrived in France in the entourage of Maria Theresa, the Infanta of Spain, as she traveled to the court of her new husband Louis XIV. The young queen had a passion for chocolate, and at the time that was enough to make the beverage fashionable among French elites. Aristocrats adopted chocolate in droves, and from there it spread to other elite segments of society.<sup>35</sup> In Britain, the beverage took hold after its navy took Jamaica in 1655, and the nation gained access to an already-thriving cacao industry. Production drove demand, as a wave of advertising sought to popularize democratic consumption of chocolate in establishments that also served coffee and tea.<sup>36</sup> A treatise by one Dr. Henry Stubbes advocated the drink as an aphrodisiac in no uncertain terms:

“If the amorous and martial Turk should ever taste it, he would despise his Opium. If Grecians and Arabians had ever tried it, they would have thrown away their Wake-robbers and Cuckow-pintles; and I do not doubt but you London Gentlemen do value it above all your Cullisses and Jellies, your Anchovies... and your Whites of Eggs.”<sup>37</sup>

By the early eighteenth century, chocolate had gained acceptance in prosperous homes, and a kitchen was not considered up to snuff unless it had a chocolate mill, a special whisk for mixing crude cacao paste with other ingredients.<sup>38</sup> In Holland, chocolate grew in popularity among merchants as Amsterdam became the major mid-seventeenth-century market for cacao in northern Europe, and establishments

<sup>29</sup> Jamieson, “The Essence of Commodification,” 274.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>31</sup> Norton, “Tasting Empire,” 666-680.

<sup>32</sup> Coe, *True History*, 132-33.

<sup>33</sup> Vara, “Origines,” 305.

<sup>34</sup> Norton, “Tasting Empire,” 666.

<sup>35</sup> James Walvin, *Fruits of Empire: Exotic Produce and British Taste, 1660-1800* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 94.

<sup>36</sup> Coe, *True History*, 167-69.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>38</sup> Walvin, *Fruits of Empire*, 96.

servicing it sprang up all over the city.<sup>39</sup> The democratization of consumption in northern Europe mirrored patterns of consumption in Spain, and by 1700 chocolate was consumed by middle- and upper-class men and women across the continent. Overall, in the seventeenth century chocolate became the most important social beverage in Europe.<sup>40</sup> Antonio de León Pinelo, in an important 1636 treatise on chocolate, summed up its spread to Madrid:

Los Indios naturales de la Nueva España... antes que los Españoles entrasen a pacificarlas, usavan de muchas bebidas que hazian de varias yervas i raizes, frutas i granos; i entre ellas era una la del Chocolate; que por ser, o paracer la mejor, mas guítoa i regalada, i mas capaz de nuevos materiales i confecciones, no solo la admitieron i usaron los Españoles en las mismas tierras en que la hallaron introducida, sino que la comunicaron a otras de las Indias, ya con la planta, ya con el comercio: i de pocos años a esta parte, continuando el traer estos Reynos las cosas de que se confecciona, i la pasta cófeccionada que se bebe; ha sido tan bien recibida, que ya se usa por regalo comun en muchas ciudades, i mas que en todas en esta Corte, que en usarla quiere competir con los lugares de su invencion i origen.<sup>41</sup>

As chocolate's popularity soared in Europe, two major changes occurred: first, the economics of the cacao trade shifted fundamentally as cacao production shifted from Mexico to South America and the Caribbean. Second, the culture of chocolate consumption was stripped—at least in the minds of consumers—of its indigenous roots, as Europeans created revisionist histories that attributed agency for the beverage's current form (and accompanying popularity) to whites. Together, I will argue, these shifts allowed Europeans to forget that their favorite beverage remained remarkably close to its native origins.

## THE FIRST SHIFT: ECONOMICS

Demand for cacao skyrocketed in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century New Spain, fueled by expanding markets for the commodity in both Mesoamerica and Europe. At the same time, however, European diseases and abusive Spanish *encomenderos* caused a demographic crisis in which as much as 80% of the region's population died. "Even when the Indian population declined greatly from disease epidemics (1576-77)," wrote Allen M. Young, "the *encomenderos* continued to levy the same tribute specified in the 1548-51 tax assessment, with the effect that the survivors paid for the dead!"<sup>42</sup> Native cultivators were often required to pay more in annual taxes than they could gain in the sale of their lands, and as a result many ceased to care for their

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>40</sup> Vara, "Origines," 305.

<sup>41</sup> "The native Indians of New Spain...before the Spaniards arrived to pacify them, had many drinks that were made from various herbs, roots, fruits and grains; among these was Chocolate. Since it was, or at least to seemed to be, the best, most delicious and cheapest of them all, and the one that was most capable of creating new foods and edible confections, the Spaniards not only permitted it and used it in the same lands in which they found it, but they also passed it on to other peoples of the Indies, who already had the plant and a system of commerce. Within a few years, continuing to bring the foods made from chocolate and the chocolate paste made for drinking to these Realms, it had been so well received that it was already commonly used as a gift in many cities. It was used this way in this Court more than anywhere else, so that in doing so the Court wanted to share it with the places of chocolate's origin and invention." Antonio de León Pinelo, *Question Moral Si El Chocolate Quebranta El Ayuno Ecclesiastico: Tratase de otras bebidas i confecciones que se usan en varias provincias* (Madrid: Por la viuda de Iuan González, 1636), 1.

<sup>42</sup> Young, *The Chocolate Tree*, 29.

plantations or replace trees that had died.<sup>43</sup> The indigenous labor force declined in tandem, and cacao cultivation soon died out in many of the areas that it had been strongest.

As production in Soconusco and present-day Guatemala fell precipitously, Mexico City cacao prices soared, prompting new producers to enter the market. The two major regions that stepped in to fill demand were Guayaquil, in Ecuador, and coastal Venezuela. Guayaquil — New Spain's major supplier — grew forastero cacao, a variety that grew wild in South American forests. It was of lower quality than the criollo grown in Mexico, but was both more productive and hardier, which allowed plantations to thrive within just a few years of the first plantings. Despite mercantilist efforts to prohibit trade between the viceroyalties, cacao flowed in massive quantities from South America into New Spain. Between 1784 and 1821, 41% of the beans entering Central America had been grown in Guayaquil. The beans' low price helped to democratize consumption among both natives and whites.<sup>44</sup> By 1775, many menial laborers such as cobblers, muleteers, and coachmen in Mexico City drank chocolate twice a day, and even poor homes had metates to grind roasted cacao.<sup>45</sup>

As chocolate grew popular in the Old World, European powers began to resent the Spanish crown's monopoly on the commodity, and many began to scramble for a piece of the lucrative cacao trade. Starting in the 1630s, seedlings were taken around the world: plantations sprang up in Dutch Curaçao, French Martinique, British Jamaica, and Portuguese Brazil.<sup>46</sup> The Spanish took cacao to the Philippines on the Manila Galleon in 1663. The Dutch brought the tree to Indonesia, and also planted it on São Tome off the western coast of Africa.<sup>47</sup> England seized Jamaica in 1655, at a time when cacao was more economically important than sugar on the island, and it reaped the benefits.<sup>48</sup> In many places where cacao was planted it became more than simply an export commodity. In the late eighteenth century, Venezuela maintained one quarter of its harvest for local consumption.<sup>49</sup> In the Philippines, cacao became a popular local delicacy, the use of which has persisted into modern times. On balance, though, cacao's spread did more harm than good: in seventeenth century Venezuela, African slaves provided the backbone of cacao *encomenderos'* labor supply. Portuguese slavers would stop in Caracas and exchange a portion of their human cargo for cacao, which they would then carry onward to sell in New Spain.<sup>50</sup>

## THE SECOND SHIFT: CULTURE

"The Indians, who have used this Drink time out of mind, prepared it without any great Art," D. Quélius wrote of chocolate in 1724:

They roasted their Kernels in earthen Pots, then ground them between two Stones, diluted them with hot Water, and season'd them with Pimento... Achiota... [and] Attolla... All these things joined together, gave to the Composition so strange a Look, and so odd a Taste, that a Spanish Soldier said, it was more fit to be thrown to Hogs, than presented to men.

<sup>43</sup> William R Fowler, "Cacao Production, Tribute, and Wealth in Sixteenth-Century Izalcos, El Salvador," in *Chocolate in Mesoamerica: A Cultural History of Cacao*, ed. Cameron L. McNeil (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 314.

<sup>44</sup> Coe, *True History*, 187-88.

<sup>45</sup> William Gervase Clarence-Smith, *Cocoa and Chocolate, 1765-1914* (London: Routledge, 2000), 16.

<sup>46</sup> Young, 34.

<sup>47</sup> Walvin, 93.

<sup>48</sup> Walvin, 95-96.

<sup>49</sup> Clarence-Smith, 16.

<sup>50</sup> Jamieson, 274.

The Spaniards, taught by the Mexicans, and convinced by their own Experience, that this Drink, as rustick as it appeared to them, nevertheless yielded very wholesome Nourishment; try'd to make it more agreeable by the Addition of Sugar, some Oriental Spices, and Things that grew there, which it will be needless to mention... because of so many Ingredients, there is none continued down to us but Vanilla.<sup>51</sup>

Thus went the traditional eighteenth-century narrative of chocolate's adoption. Europeans could not stomach the idea that a beverage so central to their culture and religion had come from an inferior and non-Christian culture, so they invented a new story of its appropriation that disassociated cacao from its indigenous origins. However, despite their best efforts to the contrary, native methods, recipes, and flavorings still persisted in chocolate.

Cacao's native American roots first became an issue in New Spain. As it grew in popularity in the 1530s and 1540s, Spanish women began to take it during the Eucharistic fast (known as the *ayuno eclesiastico* in Spanish), a period between midnight and Holy Communion during which devout Catholics refrained from taking nourishment. There was no equivalent to chocolate in European society, and debate about whether the beverage constituted a food — and thus whether its consumption could violate Catholic law — raged in both the New World and the Old for two and a half centuries, even after several popes sanctioned chocolate consumption.<sup>52</sup> If chocolate had been ruled unacceptable, Spaniards and creoles would have been unable to consume it in the early morning (when many desired it most) and during annual fast periods such as Lent. That would have been quite an issue for Mexico City's chocolate addicts, and many fought vigorously in defense of their favorite beverage.

European traveler Thomas Gage published an account in 1648 that remains the most famous story about the debate: in Chiapa Real, he wrote, upper-class white women began having chocolate brought to them by their indigenous servants during mass, interrupting many sermons and infuriating the local bishop. To stop the practice, the bishop banned chocolate consumption in church and threatened to excommunicate violators. His flock, though, simply moved to other pastures and began attending mass in more tolerant local monasteries and convents—prompting another threat of excommunication. Gage wrote that the bishop died eight days later after drinking chocolate poisoned by one of his parishioners.<sup>53</sup>

Over the course of the *ayuno eclesiastico* debate, many writers sought to remove chocolate from its Indian origins in order to justify it as a beverage compatible with Christian law. Antonio de León Pinelo, who in 1636 took a middle ground by concluding that chocolate's status as a food depended on how many nourishing ingredients (e.g., maize) were added to it, wrote:

Los Indios con su uso no nos pueden dar consecuencia [en el debate]: porque ni ellos guardavan abstinencia de manjares en dias ciertos, ni se les prohibian ningunos, ni tenian el precepto del ayuno eclesiastico. Luego no podemos hazer argumento de sus comidas, ni sus bebidas, para nuestro uso i religion.

Las mas naciones de las indias comian carne humana.<sup>54</sup>

Even more importantly, the Eucharistic fast debate intensified pseudo-scientific discussions about chocolate, which created a whole new (equally false) narrative: chocolate as a medicine.

The first references to chocolate praised its restorative and invigorating qualities, but few went into much detail. “He who has drunk one cup,” wrote Hernán Cortés’ page, “can travel a whole day without any further food, especially in very hot climates.”<sup>55</sup> Within decades, however, discussion of chocolate had been drawn into the realm of Western physiological theory. At the time, doctors and scientists held that human bodies were composed of four “cardinal humours:” blood, phlegm, choler (yellow bile), and melancholy (black bile). Each man or woman had a unique balance of these humours, which determined their temperaments. When the balance was thrown off — as it could be by consuming a food that fueled production of one humour over the rest — illness resulted.<sup>56</sup>

Debate raged over chocolate's effects on the four humours, and its classification as “hot,” “wet,” “cold,” or “dry,” which would determine how it affected people of various temperaments. Several interesting accounts survive. Quélus had much to say on the subject:

The Spaniards, who were first acquainted with Chocolate after the Conquest of the new World, have laid it down for an undoubted Truth, that Chocolate is cold and dry, participating of the Nature of Earth. They have supported this Determination neither with Reason nor Experience; nor do they know from whence they learnt it; perhaps they have taken it up on the Words, and from the Tradition of the Inhabitants of the Country. Let that be as it will, it is natural from false principles to draw false Conclusions.<sup>57</sup>

Quélus's outspoken contempt for native cultures served to separate his classification of chocolate from the beverage's native roots, and justify European consumption based on modern, supposedly scientific principles. Other commentators focused on chocolate's health benefits. Marie de Villars, wife of the French ambassador to Madrid, wrote to a friend in 1680:

I observe my chocolate diet, to which I believe I owe my health... My temperament would seem incapable of accepting this nourishment. However, it is admirable and delicious... I often think that if I should see you again, I would make you take it methodically, and make you confess that there is nothing better for the health. There's an encomium of chocolate! Remember that I am in Spain, and taking it is almost my only pleasure.<sup>58</sup>

Juan de Cárdenas, writing in 1591, summed up the massive differences of opinion chocolate generated:

En quanto a los daños y provechos que hace, oigo decir a cada uno su parecer: unos abominan el chocolate, haciéndolo inventor de cuantas enfermedades hay; otros dicen que no hay tal cosa en el mundo, y que con él engordan y traen gana de comer y buen color en el rostro, y si es muher estéril se hace preñada,

<sup>51</sup> Quélus, 63-64.

<sup>52</sup> Coe, 150-51.

<sup>53</sup> Coe, 185-186.

<sup>54</sup> “The Indians with their use of it cannot give us any conclusion to the debate: because they neither observed any abstinence of delicacies on certain days, prohibited it, nor had any ecclesiastic precept. We were unable to come to any conclusion afterwards about their foods or drinks for the purpose of our own uses and religion. Most of the Indian nations ate human meat.” León Pinelo, 16.

<sup>55</sup> Young, 29.

<sup>56</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, “Humour,” 2008.

<sup>57</sup> Quélus, 39.

<sup>58</sup> Coe, 138.

y la parida bebiéndole con atole tiene sobrada leche.<sup>59</sup>

Before the debates, the popular conception of chocolate focused on its American roots and its status as an exotic beverage. After them, cacao became just another commodity, and its effect on humans — rather than humans' effects on it — became its only important quality.

In addition, as Quélus' passage at the beginning of this section demonstrates, native chocolate came to be seen as a crude, disgusting drink, which the Europeans had adopted for its health benefits and subsequently modified to fit their civilized palates. By writing that Europeans had “try'd to make it more agreeable by the Addition of Sugar, some Oriental Spices, and Things that grew there,” Quélus twisted the true story of chocolate beyond recognition. In fact, New World Spaniards had adopted native chocolate wholesale, consuming all the spices that the Aztecs had, and adding sugar only as a cheaper substitute for honey. Quélus and others like him argued that European chocolate represented a fundamental break from that of the Aztecs, when in fact the beverages were initially almost identical. A Jesuit ship sailing to Spain in 1634 brought not only large quantities of chocolate, but also Xochinacatzli, Mecaxóchitl, and vanilla — the three most important Aztec spices for the drink. Furthermore, the additions that Europeans had made to chocolate recipes were generally attempts to recreate rather than replace native flavors.<sup>60</sup> As late as 1685, Philippe Sylvestre Dufour's treatise on chocolate making gave the following recipe to European readers:

With each hundred of Cacao's you must mingle two grains of Chile, or Pepper of Mexico, of those great Grains which we have elsewhere told you are called Chilpatlagua, and for want of them they use to take two Indian pepper corns, the largest and the least hot that you can find, or if you can get them the Pimiento's of Spain, and handful of Annis-seed, two of those Flowers called Xuchinachutzli [Xochinacatzli] or little ears, and two others name Mecasuchil [Mecaxóchitl], if there be need to loosen the Belly: In Spain instead of these last they are wont to use the powder of six Roses of Alexandria, vulgarly called pale Roses, a little Bean Cod or Vanilla de Campeche, two drams of Cinnamon, a dozen of Almonds, and as many Filberts [hazelnuts], half a pound of Sugar, such a quantity of Achiotte as shall be sufficient to colour the whole composition.<sup>61</sup>  
[Italics added for indigenous ingredients.]

All the key elements of Aztec cacao were there, and the optional additions that later became popular, such as peppercorns and roses of Alexandria, were suggested as inferior substitutes to genuine Mesoamerican ingredients. Methods of preparing cacao beans for the beverage still strongly mimicked Aztec techniques at the time, contrary to much European writing. Juan de Cárdenas falsely asserted that Guatemalan women had invented the pasta form of chocolate, when in fact it had been used for centuries among Mesoamerican peoples prior to conquest.<sup>62</sup> Though chocolate recipes lost much of their complexity in the eighteenth century, they did so as part of

<sup>59</sup> “Regarding the damages and benefits that it causes, I hear it said that everyone has his own opinion: some hate chocolate, making it out to be the creator of some diseases; others say that there is nothing like it in the world, and that with it they get fat and it makes them want to eat and makes their faces a healthy color; and if a woman is barren, it makes her pregnant, and the calf that drinks it with corn has more than enough milk.” Juan de Cárdenas, *Problemas y Secretos Maravillosos de las Indias* (México, D.F.: Bibliófilos Mexicanos, 1965), 128.

<sup>60</sup> Norton, 682.

<sup>61</sup> Philippe Sylvestre Dufour, *The Manner of Making Coffee, Tea, and Chocolate: As It Is Used in Most Parts of Europe, Asia, Africa, and America. With their virtues* (London: Printed for William Crook at the Green Dragon without Temple Bar near Devereux Court, 1685), F3.

<sup>62</sup> Cárdenas, *Problemas y Secretos*, 127.

a comprehensive simplification of cuisine that took place across Europe.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, the notion that Europeans had lifted chocolate out of a strange indigenous concoction and transformed it into its contemporary form was propagated as part of a false colonialist ideology. In reality, as Marcy Norton writes, “Europeans inadvertently internalized Mesoamerican aesthetics” in a way that stood in such clear opposition to the dominant notions of racial and cultural supremacy that it had to be denied.<sup>63</sup> Chocolate demonstrated that culture could flow up the societal ladder in the Hispanic world, as it traveled from natives to conquistadors, priests, merchants, and finally the royal court. Most importantly, it maintained its fundamental Mesoamerican flavor all through the process. A closer look at chocolate's centuries-long journey around the world reveals the complexity of cultural exchanges in the colonial-era Atlantic world and challenges previous historical claims that such exchanges were solely a top-down process.

By the nineteenth century, as global cacao production began to shift toward Africa and Brazil, chocolate consumption in the New World was in decline. Coffee and tea had come to be considered more cosmopolitan than chocolate in Europe, and coffee-houses were beginning to make inroads, even in Madrid. Chocolate was clearly going out of fashion, to such an extent that in 1770 Spain's Conde de Campomanes advocated tea rather than chocolate at breakfast as a step toward dignifying the nation's standing among its European peers.<sup>64</sup> Ever attentive to Continental fashion, American creoles sought to enhance their status by adopting other drinks: a Colombian journalist wrote that Bogotá's growth from a “provincial backwater to a cosmopolitan capital” was demonstrated by the changing tastes of its elites: from chocolate in the 1810s, they shifted to French coffee in the 1840s before finally settling on British tea in the 1860s.<sup>65</sup> As bars of eating chocolate arrived in the mid-nineteenth century, chocolate consumption, at least by a sixteenth-century understanding of the term, largely died out. Both creoles and indigenous peoples used the beverage less and less, and in the intervening years traditional Mesoamerican use has almost disappeared. Cameron McNeil writes that in the community of Salama, Guatemala, near large cacao groves in a region where the tree had been grown for millennia, “the only beverage containing cacao in the main market in July 2004 was a rice atole flavored with machine-processed cocoa powder.”<sup>66</sup>

There are still traces left of the old ways: vanilla is still paired with cacao in almost all of its modern forms, as it has been since at least the fifteenth century. Some traditional Italian bakeries still grind cacao beans on a metate for use in hot chocolate. And to this day, many Filipino families prepare chocolate for special occasions using methods similar to those the Spanish used in sixteenth-century Mexico, roasting beans in a wok and crushing them with a wooden roller, then grinding them in a corn mill.<sup>67</sup> These customs are remnants of the age, centuries ago, when genuine Mesoamerican chocolate conquered the world.

<sup>63</sup> Norton, 680.

<sup>64</sup> Jamieson, 286.

<sup>65</sup> Carlos Fuentes, *The Buried Mirror: Reflections on Spain and the New World* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), 279.

<sup>66</sup> McNeil, 24.

<sup>67</sup> John A West, “A Brief History and Botany of Cacao,” in *Chillies to Chocolate: Foods the Americas Gave the World*, ed. Nelson Foster and Linda S. Cordell (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1992), 109.

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# INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR MARK SWISLOCKI

BY HILLARY TAYLOR

*Professor Mark Swislocki agreed to meet with the Brown Journal of History for a conversation about his recently published book, Culinary Nostalgia: Regional Food Culture and the Urban Experience in Shanghai (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). The Journal asks him about his interests in food history, Shanghai, and the tensions between nationalism and regional identities. The following is a transcript of the interview.*

BJH: What were you looking to get at in this study?

MS: If there was something I was trying to explain, it would be why food culture, unlike other forms of cultural practice in late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century China never really underwent a nationalization process. Language—Mandarin—was nationalized. We have examples of national clothing styles, but no one ever things that food might be able to speak comprehensively about what constitutes some kind of national essence. I found that regional food culture provides distinctive localities with ways of envisioning ideal societies that speak directly to the problem of locality itself.

BJH: How did you become interested in this topic?

MS: My interest came out of cooking and initially had very little to do with intellectual questions. What I found from cooking, during my years as a graduate student in particular, was that food gave me a vehicle and an arena for a kind of resistance to the professionalization process of historical training. It was essentially a form of procrastination...that had a kind of purchase as a daily life survival strategy that could be lived out in a short period of time, namely the amount of time to cook a meal. Only later did I begin to extrapolate this personal experience into a historical question about how people make food into a resource for carving out a

sphere of autonomy from large-scale historical processes, namely urbanization, industrialization, capitalism, nationalism, and socialism.

BJH: What kind of sources did you use?

MS: Fortunately and unfortunately Chinese history has a bottomless pit of source material for food history. More often than not, historians are left with a record of food consciousness than the food itself. Reconstructing actual diets is much harder than people's emotional investments in what they ate. In China, those sentiments are accessible in everything from local political histories—the gazetteers—travelogues, urban guidebooks, and fiction. When food became a problem of state, government documents, especially those addressing degrees of dissatisfaction among the public with government policies, were also useful.

BJH: Why the focus on Shanghai?

MS: Culinary nostalgia is a phenomenon of a literature of exile and it is defined broadly as a dislocation in space and time alike. For many, Shanghai is the case par excellence in late 19<sup>th</sup> /early 20<sup>th</sup>-century China. Shanghai is often thought of as an emblem for China's modernity, but because things changed so quickly there, it also became an arena for the articulation of a wide variety of traditionalistic statements of longing. It's an incredibly cosmopolitan city, both in the international and domestic sense. A number of people moved to Shanghai from other parts of China. The whole idea of the city becomes an arena of competing regional sentiments.

BJH: People often associate the Chinese Communist Party with food shortages and an attack on traditional culture. Yet the CCP began promoting 'top chefs' in the 1950s and 1960s. What motivated this policy?

MS: 'Top chef' was one of the most surprising things I found when I was researching the 1950s and 1960s. The period is known for great food scarcity. Interesting was that it presented an alternative perspective on the question of all the bad food [Western] foreigners encountered when they started returning to China in the late 1970s. Most visitors to China concluded that the state had destroyed food intentionally... to eliminate local culture. I found instead that food culture, regional food culture in particular, was one of the few areas of life in which the state actively sought to promote high culture. This was in fact the earliest moment I know of in which the state created cooking schools to train high-end chefs. They were actually trying to preserve traditions that they recognized were on the verge of being lost. This is a very different image of the CCP that seemed important to bring to light. The CCP did this because it recognized that people wanted high quality regional specialties, which [led me] to learn about the state's patronage of high-end chefs. It also gave people a new kind of career to aspire to. Historically, chefs had a lowly status, and the state made being a professional chef an appealing opportunity.

# THE CHANGING RESPONSE TO POVERTY

PHILADELPHIA, RELIGIOUS REVIVAL, AND THE FEMALE  
HEBREW BENEVOLENT SOCIETY: 1819-1860

BY JENNIFER GRAYSON

*Jennifer Grayson uses the case of the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society to demonstrate the ways in which Jewish women were influenced by the Second Great Awakening and played an active role in the societal shifts that accompanied it.*

In 1819, a group of middle class Philadelphia Jewish women came together to found the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society. Their goal was two-fold: to help the poor members of the Jewish community and to protect them against evangelical attempts to convert them. Despite its inherently Jewish character and traditional stance against the dominance of evangelism in American culture, however, the FHBS conformed to contemporaneous American attitudes towards the poor. Throughout the antebellum years, it evolved according to the changing American understanding of poverty and how to address it. Although the FHBS was a uniquely Jewish organization, antebellum Jewish women were an integral part of Philadelphian society as a whole. They thus appropriated the values around them—including those of religious fervor—into their own organizations.

These Jewish women were part of a small yet prominent minority. In 1820, only about 450 Jews lived within Philadelphia and its suburbs, and they comprised a mere one percent of the city's white population.<sup>1</sup> Yet by the end of the eighteenth century, Jewish families in Philadelphia had become relatively prosperous, and many Jewish merchants rose to prominence in urban life.<sup>2</sup> As established members of Philadelphia's middle class, many Jewish women relished the opportunity to take part in middle class female urban life — going to balls and cotillions, participating in charitable societies. They did so in a decidedly non-Jewish environment, alongside mostly non-

<sup>1</sup> Marion L. Bell, *Crusade in the City: Revivalism in Nineteenth Century Philadelphia* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1977), 143.  
<sup>2</sup> Edwin Wolf and Maxwell Whiteman, *The History of the Jews of Philadelphia from Colonial Times to the Age of Jackson* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1957), 183.

Jewish peers.<sup>3</sup> Through these interactions, Philadelphia's Jewish women were exposed to and took part in the development of the values and institutions of Philadelphia middle class society.

Many Jewish women participated in charitable organizations, a typical activity within Philadelphia's middle class. Although many gentiles devoted themselves to evangelical societies as well, charities — that is, those associations that gave in-kind goods and monetary donations to Philadelphia's poor — were distinct from religious Christian organizations such as Sunday schools and Bible tract societies.<sup>4</sup> Relief of the poor was separate from evangelistic pursuits. The poor were viewed not as morally or spiritually inferior, but rather as victims of unfortunate circumstances.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the Puritans had understood the social hierarchy to be God's will; poverty was inevitable, and members of the community were obligated to help in its relief.<sup>6</sup>

This philosophy is reflected in the 1803 constitution of the Female Association of Philadelphia for the Relief of Women and Children in Reduced Circumstances, which asserted that “the many distresses incident to human nature require the constant aid of the humane and benevolent.”<sup>7</sup> It specifically referred to the poor as “victims of misfortune,”<sup>8</sup> rather than as immoral people. Even though the Female Association's eventual goal was to support the education of poor children, they would only do this “whenever their funds enable[d] them to support the expense.”<sup>9</sup> Considering that the organization raised as much as \$3076 in its first three years yet still did not support any educational endeavors, education was apparently not a top priority. Rather, the Association valued physical relief of the poor over general moral reform or Christian piety.

The women sought to maximize the impact of their resources. They assigned each ward of the city a manager who evaluated each applicant for aid with regards to “her moral character, her situation, her habits and mode of life, her wants, and the best means of affording relief.”<sup>10</sup> Although this was for the purpose of ensuring that “assistance may not be extended to the vicious and idle,”<sup>11</sup> the women were not primarily concerned with moral reform. Instead, they wanted to give out aid as efficiently as possible. By evaluating a poor woman's living situation, they could best determine how to help her, whether through public aid, in-kind donations, or monetary relief.<sup>12</sup>

This is not to say that the women of the Female Association were content to offer temporary relief without trying to lift indigent women out of poverty. They did seek to “increase the exertion, the virtue and the hopes of the poor...to rouse them from that state of apathy and indolence into which their situation tends to throw them.”<sup>13</sup> This was accomplished, however, not by extolling Christian virtues or condemning intemperance, but by offering “advice, direction, and encouragement”

to women seeking employment.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the Association's *First Annual Report* to donors does not once mention either religion or God, something that distinguishes it from subsequent charitable organizations.<sup>15</sup>

This lack of overt religious rhetoric is typical of late-eighteenth-century organizations, many of which were supported by a diverse group of individuals and institutions representing various religious sects. For example, the Philadelphia Dispensary, founded in 1786 to give medical relief to those poor who could not be hospitalized, was funded through donations from societies representing such varied groups as Scottish immigrants, African-Americans, and Jews.<sup>16</sup>

All religious groups took responsibility for the care of the poor, including Jews. Yet, Jews, and Jewish women in particular, were probably overrepresented in charitable organizations of the time. Indeed, eight of the twenty-three founders of the Female Association were Jewish. Participation in charitable organizations was both consistent with Jewish values and provided a way for women to enter public life. Jewish women, in trying to be as “American” as possible, dedicated themselves to the same causes as their gentile peers.

Many Jewish women also joined the Philadelphia Orphan Society, which was founded in 1814 under the auspices of the Female Association. However, unlike the Female Association, the Orphan Society took on a more religious tone. In overseeing the day-to-day functions of an orphan asylum, it concerned itself with promoting Christian morality to young children. The governess of the asylum was obligated to “instill into the minds of the children the principles of religion,” and the children were required to attend church every Sunday.<sup>17</sup> There is a distinction, however, between the place of religion within the asylum and its place in the governing society. At this time, family and church were intrinsically linked in the minds of most Americans.<sup>18</sup> The asylum was expected to stand in for the children's families; the Society even refers to the orphans as members of the governess' “family.”<sup>19</sup> The asylum, functioning as a family, was supposed to teach Christian values. Because of the Jewish community's small size, Jewish women did not need to worry that any Jewish children would enter the orphanage and be converted. As a result, they felt comfortable supporting the society, which sought to provide a better life to Philadelphia's unfortunate children.

Furthermore, the Society itself — that is, the group of Philadelphia women who raised money and supervised the orphanage — did not promote overt evangelism. Though founded in the “school-room-back of the Second Presbyterian Church,”<sup>20</sup> the organization was non-sectarian and made sure that ministers of different Christian denominations alternated in officiating at the orphanage's Sunday services.<sup>21</sup> When William White, an Episcopal minister, spoke at the Society's 1815 anniversary meeting, he likened the story of Moses being drawn out of the water to the Orphan Association's work and proclaimed the education of children “the beginning of a most splendid usefulness.”<sup>22</sup> Education is intended to ensure future “usefulness,” preparing children to gain employment as adults and thereby participate fully in the

<sup>3</sup> Dianne Ashton, *Rebecca Gratz: Women and Judaism in Antebellum America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 52.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 55.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 65

<sup>6</sup> David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum* (New York: Aldine, 1990), 5.

<sup>7</sup> *The Constitution of the Female Association for the Relief of Women and Children in Reduced Circumstances* (Philadelphia: Jane Aitken, 1803).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *First Annual Report of the Female Association for the Relief of Women and Children in Reduced Circumstances* (Philadelphia: Jane Aitken, 1803).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Constitution of the Female Association.*

<sup>16</sup> Wolf and Whiteman, *History of the Jews of Philadelphia*, 183.

<sup>17</sup> *Constitution and By-Laws of the Orphan Society of Philadelphia: Instituted December 20, 1814* (Philadelphia: William Fry, 1815), 4.

<sup>18</sup> David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum* (New York: Aldine, 1990), 14.

<sup>19</sup> *First Annual Report of the Philadelphia Orphan Society* (Philadelphia: William Fry, 1816), 5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>22</sup> William White, *A Sermon on the Drawing of Moses out of the Waters: Delivered Before the Orphan Society of Philadelphia on Sunday, the fifth of March, 1815* (Philadelphia: Published at the Request of the Society, 1815).

community. Even a minister offering convocation stressed the pragmatic mission of the Society over its promotion of Christian morality or Christian faith.

Nonetheless, by participating in an organization that began every meeting with a Christian prayer and bore the explicit responsibility of imparting Christian values to children, Jewish women were constantly reminded of their religion's suspect status among mainstream antebellum society.<sup>23</sup> As the Second Great Awakening's Evangelical Protestantism came to dominate Philadelphia throughout the 1810s and 1820s, middle-class women who had previously participated in more secular endeavors such as the Female Association changed the focus of their energies to evangelism. One of their primary aims was the conversion of Jews. The Philadelphia Society for Meliorating the Condition of the Jews, one of the organizations founded for this purpose, was established in 1823 and sought to eventually create a colony of Christianized Jews in America in order to best reform the people as a whole.<sup>24</sup>

Despite their ambitious goal of rounding up and relocating the Jews, missionary organizations targeted their efforts in the short-term primarily on the poor. Providing relief to the poor was now a means to an end: the conversion of a soul for Christ. In his 1832 sermon to the New York Protestant Episcopal City Mission Society, Rev. Benjamin C. Cutler explained that the best opportunities to "save" someone could be found in the young, the sick, and the poor.<sup>25</sup> For this reason, missionaries often targeted poor Jews.<sup>26</sup>

In response to this threat and to the increasing poverty brought about by the economic panic of 1819, three women decided that the Jewish community of Philadelphia needed its own charitable society to address the needs of the Jewish poor, and especially its women. Rebecca Gratz, Hannah Levy, and Mrs. Aaron Levy, all already prominent members of Philadelphia's Female Association and Orphan Society, came together to found the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society, the first non-Synagogue Jewish charity in the United States.<sup>27</sup>

Rebecca Gratz had been, and continued to be, the secretary of the Female Association, and she used it as an institutional model for the FHBS.<sup>28</sup> Like the Female Association, the FHBS was composed of an executive board and a group of managers who traveled into the city to meet with and evaluate those who had applied for aid. The two societies also shared a similar view of their relationship with the poor. Just as the Female Association did not condemn the poor, the women of the FHBS claimed the women they helped as their kin, referring to them as "our sisters."<sup>29</sup> A significant portion of their funds went towards "secret relief" to "reduced families in our congregation."<sup>30</sup>

The women of the FHBS had likely also been influenced by their involvement with the Philadelphia Orphan Society, whose rhetoric expressed a confluence of maternal sentiment, religiosity, and public service. When William White declared to the ladies of the Orphan Society that "the children will be remembered by you, as those whom

you had drawn out of the waters,"<sup>31</sup> he offered a maternal and religious justification for charitable endeavors that could be adopted by Jews as well as Christians.

Although the FHBS may have been founded as a reaction against the more evangelical religious activist groups, it too was steeped in religious imagery and idealism. Its expressed goals were to "visit the sick, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and bring the miserably poor to the dwelling" in accordance with "the holy law."<sup>32</sup> But even this religious language was invoked primarily in relation to the object of providing physical necessities, rather than any sort of moral or spiritual reform. Just as the Female Association talked of the education of poor children as its secondary aim, the FHBS expressed hopes of ultimately supporting Jewish education but did not consider the issue its most important priority. Instead, it focused on addressing the more direct physical needs of Philadelphia's growing Jewish community.

By 1822, roughly half of Philadelphia Jews were foreign-born.<sup>33</sup> The changing demographics of Philadelphia's Jewish community reflected those of the city as a whole. As immigration increased throughout the first few decades of the nineteenth century, urban poverty became even more pressing problem. Between 1814 and 1820, the number of individuals receiving public assistance in Philadelphia increased from 3,145 to over 5,500.<sup>34</sup> Relief organizations were overburdened, the poor tax increased, and residents began to resent having to support their city's expanding population. Nineteenth-century Americans began to search for the origins of poverty, no longer satisfied to accept it as part of God's plan. An 1817 Philadelphia report blamed poverty on "idleness, intemperance, and sickness."<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the Second Great Awakening, then gaining intensity in Philadelphia, provided a religious justification for hostility towards benevolent organizations. Revivalist ministers began to promote the idea that poverty was not part of any divinely-ordered social system or one of society's inherent problems. Nineteenth-century Americans, then, came to blame the needy for their own condition. They had effectively been made into the "Other," no longer a part of the community but a social ill.<sup>36</sup>

Americans' attitudes towards poor relief shifted; no longer accepting the practice as a communal responsibility, they began to condemn it as encouraging laziness among the lower classes. In 1828, the Philadelphia City Council relocated the almshouse outside of the city and abolished outdoor relief.<sup>37</sup> Benevolent societies were forced into the position of having to convince their donors that contributions to them were in fact beneficial to society. One way of doing this was to change their focus from physical relief of the poor to moral reform. Charitable organizations began to stress the importance of Sunday Schools and missionary work, less concerned with providing tangible relief such as food and clothing than with saving souls.<sup>38</sup> By the end of the 1820s, non-Sectarian organizations such as the Female Association had lost much of their support to these more overtly religious activist organizations.<sup>39</sup>

This outpouring of missionary fervor and new emphasis on moral reform had a significant impact on Philadelphia's Jewish community, but not quite the one the

<sup>23</sup> Ashton, *Rebecca Gratz: Women and Judaism in Antebellum America*, 100.

<sup>24</sup> Aaron Bancroft, *A discourse, delivered before the Worcester Auxiliary Society for Meliorating the Condition of the Jews, April 28, 1824* (Worcester: William Manning, 1824), 17.

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin C. Cutler, *Sermon on Behalf of the New York Protestant Episcopal City Mission Society* (New York: Protestant Episcopal Press, 1832), 15.

<sup>26</sup> Ashton, *Rebecca Gratz: Women and Judaism in Antebellum America*, 100.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Evelyn Bodek, "'Making Do': Jewish Women and Philanthropy," in *Jewish Life in Philadelphia: 1830-1940*, ed. Murray Friedman (Philadelphia: ISHI Publications, 1983), 145.

<sup>29</sup> Ashton, *Rebecca Gratz: Women and Judaism in Antebellum America*, 102.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>31</sup> White, *A Sermon on the Drawing of Moses out of the Waters*.

<sup>32</sup> "Fifth Annual Report of the Female Hebrew Sewing Society of Philadelphia," in *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate* (December 1843).

<sup>33</sup> Bell, *Crusade in the City*, 144.

<sup>34</sup> Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women*, 59.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>36</sup> Rothman, *Discovery of the Asylum*, 156-162.

<sup>37</sup> Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women*, 62.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

missionaries intended. Missionary organizations like the Society for Meliorating the Condition of the Jews had wholly failed in their efforts to convert Jews.<sup>40</sup> Even the New York auxiliary society's thirtieth anniversary report acknowledged that "the converts seem to be few."<sup>41</sup> In fact, the efforts of these societies had the opposite of their intended effect: despite their claims of "a prevailing feeling among the Jewish people in this country that modern Judaism cannot supply their spiritual wants," their proselytizing efforts encouraged Jews, in America as a whole and Philadelphia in particular, to more forcefully assert themselves and their religious beliefs. Jewish women's organizations such as the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society shifted away from the earlier secular model of providing poor relief. Instead, they established programs to promote Jewish religious ideals, including the Hebrew Sunday School, the Female Sewing Society, and the Jewish Foster Home.

It is insufficient, however, to view these societies as merely reactions against the environment of Protestant evangelism. Rather, influenced by the ever-increasing importance of religion to American Christians, Jews rededicated themselves to their religion with much the same fervor as their gentile peers. Evidence of a growing religiosity among Jewish women in particular appears, for instance, in the letters of Rebecca Gratz. The daughter of a wealthy merchant, Gratz had been a founder of the Female Association, the Orphan Society, and the FHBS. Before 1824, her letters were filled mostly with the minutiae of daily life, with the addition of occasional complaints about the tedium of writing reports for the Philadelphia Orphan Society. In 1824, however, her style shifted radically; she began to invoke God regularly and to reflect on the place of religion in her life, and wrote to her sister-in-law Maria that "the hand of God leads safely through [all things]."<sup>42</sup> Gratz had discussed her growing interest in religion with gentile friends, and after the death of her sister in 1823, they had suggested that she turn to Christian ideas on grief and loss. Her investigation of these ideas, rooted in the biblical Jewish tradition, inspired Gratz to renew her commitment to Judaism.<sup>43</sup> The strengthening of Rebecca Gratz' religious beliefs mirrors the phenomenon that had seized American society as a whole. Like pious gentile women, Gratz began to condemn luxury and materialism and to express her desires to promote morality and to dedicate herself to carrying out God's will.<sup>44</sup>

Likewise, the FHBS in its 1843 annual report sought to link its efforts to those of religious reformers as a whole. "The spirit of charity is a holy spirit," it asserted, "and in all religious communities, the love and fear of God manifests itself in good works towards their fellow-creatures."<sup>45</sup> Infected by the religious enthusiasm that surrounded them in spite of the difference in religion itself, Jewish women joined in the wave of religious revivalism gripping American society, rather than opposing it.

Although it sought to defend its community from the encroaching Christian evangelism, the FHBS embraced the same ideals of religious education and moral reform. It reported proudly that, "In the congregations of Israel in this city are many societies doing the work of charity, not only in temporal things, but in seeking and communicating knowledge."<sup>46</sup> This knowledge was instilled by the Hebrew Sunday School and other Jewish education classes, which aimed to ensure

that "our holy religion...be known to be acknowledged a sure guide to salvation."<sup>47</sup> This rhetoric of salvation is practically identical to that employed by missionary societies.<sup>48</sup> For example, the FHBS exhorted its members, "Let us seek to know Him better—serve Him better—and teach *His* law to those we aid, who have, alas! Been raised in ignorance of his ever-enduring mercy;" much like the minister who urged the Worcester Auxiliary Society of the Society for Meliorating the Condition of the Jews to "Make Jews the object of our sympathy, our love, our prayers [and] manifest towards them the spirit of our Divine Master [by] preaching to them the New Testament."<sup>49</sup>

In essence, the FHBS acted as a missionary organization for Jews. Through it, Jewish women followed the example of Christian women in distinguishing themselves on a fundamental level from the poor. The new belief that poverty indicated not only unfortunate circumstances but ignorance, both general and religious, combined with the inspiration of their renewed piety, motivated Jewish women to spread their religion in the same way as their gentile peers. By the 1830s, the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society embodied the same patronizing attitude toward the poor as Christian women's organizations. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the cases of the Hebrew Sunday School, the Female Hebrew Sewing Society, and the Jewish Foster Home, all founded and directed under the auspices of the FHBS.

The Hebrew Sunday School was modeled on the first Christian Sunday schools, created to fulfill the goals of evangelical reformers.<sup>50</sup> They provided moral and religious education to poor children, who would surely not receive proper Christian educations at home, in order to instill in them Protestant values. Originally, the Sunday schools were non-denominational and not attached to any one congregation.<sup>51</sup> The Sunday school movement in Philadelphia expanded throughout the 1820s, and by the end of the decade there were over 850 women working as Sunday school teachers.<sup>52</sup> Jewish women were impressed with the success of the American Sunday School Union, founded in Philadelphia in 1824, and recognized the need for a Jewish equivalent. After many conversations with Christian friends, Rebecca Gratz formulated a plan to appropriate the institution of Sunday school for the Jewish community.<sup>53</sup>

The Hebrew Sunday School, founded in 1838 under the direction of the FHBS, was modeled after the American Sunday School Union. Its stated goal was to provide an education to the children of "indigent Israelites" who could not afford one.<sup>54</sup> It was not affiliated with one synagogue, but open to the entire community.<sup>55</sup> Rebecca Gratz wrote,

I am gratified at the evident improvement of a large class of children in religious knowledge, more particularly as I find it influencing their conduct and manners, and gaining consideration in the minds of their parents.<sup>56</sup>

By 1838, Gratz no longer saw the poor as victims of circumstance, as the Female Association had in the past, but looked down upon them as inferior and in need of

<sup>40</sup> Bell, *Crusade in the City*, 152.

<sup>41</sup> "American Society for Meliorating the Condition of the Jews," *The New York Times*, 9 May 1853.

<sup>42</sup> Rebecca Gratz, *Letters of Rebecca Gratz*, ed. David Philipson (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1929), 66.

<sup>43</sup> Ashton, *Rebecca Gratz: Women and Judaism in Antebellum America*, 94.

<sup>44</sup> Gratz, *Letters of Rebecca Gratz*, 67.

<sup>45</sup> "Fifth Annual Report of the Female Hebrew Sewing Society of Philadelphia," *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate* (December 1843).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> For one example, see Aaron Bancroft, *A discourse, delivered before the Worcester Auxiliary Society for Meliorating the Condition of the Jews, April 28, 1824* (Worcester: William Manning, 1824).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>50</sup> Anne M. Boylan, *Sunday School: The Forming of an American Institution, 1790-1880* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 3.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>52</sup> Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women*, 76.

<sup>53</sup> Ashton, *Rebecca Gratz: Women and Judaism in Antebellum America*, 122.

<sup>54</sup> Bodek, "'Making Do': Jewish Women and Philanthropy," 147.

<sup>55</sup> Ashton, *Rebecca Gratz: Women and Judaism in Antebellum America*, 121.

<sup>56</sup> Gratz, *Letters of Rebecca Gratz*, 275.

religious and moral instruction; the evolution mirrored precisely changing Christian attitudes towards the poor.

Even the curriculum of the Hebrew Sunday School followed the model of its Christian counterparts. Isaac Leeser, the cantor at Philadelphia's Mikve Israel Synagogue as well as the publisher of the Jewish newspaper *The Occident*, wrote a "Catechism for Jewish Children," the structure of which greatly resembled that of the Christian catechism. It even included a "Jewish creed,"<sup>57</sup> despite the fact that unlike in Christianity there is no one expression of faith in Judaism.

Christian revivalists also founded sewing societies in order to attract children to a moral education.<sup>58</sup> The Ladies Hebrew Sewing Society, linked to the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society, sought to limit the effects of these Christian evangelizing societies on impressionable Jewish children. It went about this task, however, by asserting powerful religious rhetoric of its own. The Sewing Society, while acknowledging the poor's physical needs of fuel, food, and clothing, lamented that there were

Painful instances that outward poverty is but the result of a demeaned spirit, an absence of the honest pride that prefers toil to supplication, and eats the homely crust of independence, sweetened by the knowledge that they leave to the sick, the widow, and the fatherless, the boon that charity so appropriates.<sup>59</sup>

The Society especially condemned "such parents...the least fitted to qualify their children to become valuable members of society; Israelites in deed and spirit."<sup>60</sup> It considered them immoral and unfit to take care of their children, thereby fundamentally distinguishing these men and women from the Jewish community as a whole. Yet the Sewing Society was acutely aware that the greater gentile society would not make those distinctions, and stressed that the children that they assisted "are sons and daughters of Jacob, of whom each can and will add to our glory or our shame."<sup>61</sup> The women understood themselves to be "mothers" of the Jewish community and therefore responsible for the moral education of their spiritual "children," an attitude consistent with the Second Great Awakening's characterization of women as the guardians of societal virtue.

The Jewish Foster Home, also developed under the direction of women in the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society, was yet another way for middle-class Jewish women to rescue poor Jewish children from ignorance and give them moral instruction.<sup>62</sup> It sought to create an environment where "destitute Hebrew children" would be raised and educated according to Jewish principles.<sup>63</sup> Officially established in 1852, it was based on the organization of the Philadelphia Orphan Asylum, administered by the Philadelphia Orphan Society.<sup>64</sup> On the whole, the Home resembled contemporaneous orphan asylums in that its daily schedule was heavily regimented, intended to keep the children busy at all hours in order to discourage idleness.<sup>65</sup> It also tried to find apprenticeships for the children in Jewish homes that would allow them to observe the Sabbath and the other Jewish rituals.<sup>66</sup> Additionally,

<sup>57</sup> Isaac Leeser, *Catechism for Jewish Children* (Philadelphia: L. Johnson, 1863).

<sup>58</sup> Lori Ginzberg, *Women in Antebellum Reform* (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, 2000), 29.

<sup>59</sup> "Fifth Annual Report of the Female Hebrew Sewing Society of Philadelphia," *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, December 1843.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Bodek, "'Making Do': Jewish Women and Philanthropy," 148.

<sup>63</sup> "Annual Report of the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society," *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, December 1850.

<sup>64</sup> Ashton, *Rebecca Gratz: Women and Judaism in Antebellum America*, 218.

<sup>65</sup> Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum*, 218.

<sup>66</sup> Ashton, *Rebecca Gratz: Women and Judaism in Antebellum America*, 68.

the Philadelphia Orphan Society sought to place their wards in the care of families that shared their values. In the 1840s, they rejected a petition from a Mrs. Furness to adopt one of the orphans because the Furnesses were Unitarians.<sup>67</sup> In their oversight of the Jewish Foster Home, Jewish women sought to protect family life, taking on precisely the role that larger American society proscribed for women,

The overwhelming presence of women in all of these endeavors reflects the general antebellum notion that named women as promoters of morality. Women dominated the Second Great Awakening: they were much more religiously involved than men, forming a majority of attendees at churches throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>68</sup> Charles Grandison Finney, the revivalist minister, claimed that religion was a female endeavor. As popular belief held that women were morally superior to men, they exercised considerable moral authority and influence, especially over their families.<sup>69</sup> Charitable participation reinforced this role; as the Second Great Awakening targeted moral depravity in society, women had a duty to exercise public authority in order to promote private virtue.<sup>70</sup>

Traditional Judaism did not give women the same opportunity to participate in synagogue life that Christianity allowed women. Nonetheless, Judaism too emphasized women's role as guardian of the home.<sup>71</sup> Through their work with the Hebrew Sunday School, the Ladies Sewing Society, and the Jewish Foster Home, Jewish women took part in public life through their religion by promoting private morality and domesticity, exactly like their Protestant peers did. By 1860, Jewish women's organizations espoused the same ideology of femininity and moral reform promoted by Evangelical Protestantism.

Most analyses of antebellum American religious revivals and moral reform movements omit Jews altogether, or discuss them as exceptions to or resisters against the evangelical fervor of the day. Yet an examination of the evolution of Jewish institutions in the context of shifts occurring in antebellum reform organizations as a whole reveals a different picture. Both Jewish and Christian women were prompted by the religious revivals to strengthen their commitments to their faiths, and they acted on this new religiosity by taking on public roles in charitable organizations in order to promote family values and private morality. In the American imagination, both Jewish and Christian, the poor were transformed from less fortunate members of the community to ignorant outsiders in need of spiritual education. While American Christians responded to the rhetoric of the Second Great Awakening by rescinding their support from organizations providing poverty relief in favor of those promoting moral reform, Jewish charities also shifted their focus from in-kind relief to religious morality. Antebellum Jews were not an isolated minority, but a well-assimilated group of Americans that took part in the transformation of public attitudes towards poverty and charity. Thus, shaped by nineteenth-century American values, Jews created distinctly American institutions to address the specific needs of the Jewish community. The Second Great Awakening had ramifications far beyond the Protestant movement: it sparked a Jewish revival that ultimately created a uniquely American form of Judaism.

<sup>67</sup> Bell, *Crusade in the City: Revivalism in Nineteenth Century Philadelphia*, 142.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>69</sup> Ginzberg, *Women in Antebellum Reform*, 8.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>71</sup> Ashton, *Rebecca Gratz: Women and Judaism in Antebellum America*, 147.

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# RAZED TO THE GROUND

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE HINDUTVA MOVEMENT  
TOWARD THE DEMOLITION OF THE BABRI MASJID

BY SHANOOR SEERVAI

*Shanoor Seervai explores the build-up of the Hindutva movement and its manifestation in the demolition of the Babri Masjid, a mosque in Ayodhya in North India.*

In this paper, I will argue that the demolition of the Babri Masjid was a public assertion of the Hindutva movement executed by the various branches of the Sangh Parivar to mark the confluence of Indian culture with Hindu religiosity. I will examine four of the techniques that the Sangh Parivar used to gain popular support for the Ram Janmabhoomi muktijayna movement, primarily from the perspective of their social and cultural implications: (1) The construction of the notion that Hinduism was under threat due to the assertion of minority groups, (2) the manipulation of the media to disseminate the ideas behind Hindutva and the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, (3) the perpetuation of a rhetoric of masculinity to inspire violent defense of India, the Hindu “motherland,” and (4) the use of images of ritual and pilgrimage to accompany the processions to Ayodhya.

## INTRODUCTION

The Indian Sub-continent is startlingly diverse in language, topography, religion and numerous other ways. This eclecticism gives rise to a rich and vibrant culture of tolerance but it also provides the potential for the outbreak of violent conflict. India gained independence after more than two hundred years of British colonial rule on 15 August 1947. However, the victory of the non-violent freedom struggle was tainted by the ensuing religious conflict between Hindus and Muslims, leading to the bloody partition of the region into two nations, India and Pakistan. A significant portion of the Muslim population chose to remain in independent India, where they felt protected by the strong commitment to secularism enshrined in the Indian constitution. Over the past sixty-two years, the tension between Hindus and Muslims

has led to several instances of civil violence, creating the optimal political climate for the right-wing Hindu political parties to garner support for the Hindutva movement. This paper focuses on the deliberate demolition of the Babri Masjid, a mosque in North India that the BJP, the ruling political party in the state of Uttar Pradesh, not only endorsed but directly participated in.

## POLITICAL CONTEXT

On 6 December 1992, the Babri Masjid was demolished by *kar sevaks*<sup>1</sup> with the aim to liberate the land on which Ram was born (Ram Janmabhoomi mukti yajna). The movement was led by various groups of the Sangh Parivar, the family of organizations and political parties of the Hindutva movement, including the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) along with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and other offshoots such as the Bajrang Dal. The Babri Masjid was built in 1528 by Mir Baqi, a nobleman of the Mughal Emperor Babur's court. The RSS, VHP and BJP allege that the Babri Masjid was built after demolishing a temple that commemorated the birthplace of the Indian God Ram, although there is no factual evidence to support this claim. This movement was spearheaded by the BJP, which was the state government in power in Uttar Pradesh (where Ayodhya is located); however the national Congress-led government did not make adequate attempts to prevent it. Arguably, the Congress did not want to prevent the demolition, in the hope of appeasing the majority Hindu population while simultaneously retaining the support of minorities. Historically, the Congress's stance on the issue was weak: on 22 December 1949, Hindus entered the mosque and converted it into a temple by installing an idol of Ram in it. Security measures increased and the temple gate was locked, but the government did not enforce the removal of the Hindu idols, thus allowing the de-facto conversion of the mosque into a temple.<sup>2</sup> To appease the Hindu population after the Shah Bano case,<sup>3</sup> Rajiv Gandhi's government opened the doors of the Babri Masjid to Hindu worship on 1 February 1986.<sup>4</sup> These are two examples of events indicate that the Congress hoped to retain Hindu support without being directly partisan to the Hindutva movement and the demolition of the Babri Masjid.<sup>5</sup>

While the main objective of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement was to expand the Sangh Parivar, there were subtle differences in the agendas of each of its branches. The VHP and RSS are overtly cultural organizations and wanted to construct a powerful symbolic centre in Ayodhya; however, they are implicitly militaristic organizations, which became clear in their willingness to use violence to reclaim the land on which the mosque was built. On the other hand, the BJP's primary objective was to gain political strength, "winning the upper hand in the press, in the legal battles" and ultimately win national elections.<sup>6</sup> I will not go into the nuances of these differences and try to examine the Ram Janmabhoomi movement as the result of the collective motives and actions of the Sangh Parivar. I would also like to acknowledge that I have not focused on the political aspects and implications of the Ram Janmabhoomi

movement to the same extent as I have focused on social and cultural implications. My intention is to develop a better understanding of the religious, social and cultural tools the Sangh Parivar used to manipulate and mobilize the Hindu population without critically examining the details of the relationships between the organizations and political parties involved.

## HINDUISM UNDER THREAT

The Sangh Parivar drew its power by generating fear amongst India's Hindu population that Hinduism was under threat from India's minority populations. The perceived threat to Hinduism was portrayed through the strategic manipulation of recent crises surrounding religion in India, including (1) the crisis over Sikh separatist demands in Punjab, (2) the demands of Kashmiri Muslims for the autonomy of Jammu and Kashmir, (3) the Shah Bano case (1980) and the decision by Rajiv Gandhi's government to allow Muslims to follow "personal laws", (4) the partial implementations by the V. P. Singh government in 1990 of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission for compensatory discrimination to the Other Backward Classes.<sup>7</sup> I would like to focus on how the climate that these crises created was ideal for launching the Ram Janmabhoomi movement.

The BJP invented the notion of "pseudo-secularism" to describe policies that did not benefit the Hindu majority. The definition of secularism itself comes into question: the BJP claims to be committed to "Positive Secularism" or "sarva dharma sambhava", which suggests that equal respect be given to all religions. This has very different implications from "dharma nirpekshata," the definition of secularism that is based on the separation of religion and politics.<sup>8</sup> "Sarva dharma sambhava," the idea that "all citizens must have *equal* right to freedom of religion and that the state must not *discriminate* on the basis of religion,"<sup>9</sup> discards one of the cornerstones of democracy: the protection of minorities from majority rule, and has led to "brute majoritarianism."<sup>10</sup> For example, the adoption of clauses of the Mandal report implied positive discrimination, and this was against the definition of secularism that the BJP claimed to adhere to. Any policy that protected religious minorities from exploitation was used to incite resentment under the claim that it was an act of pseudo-secularism. Furthermore, in defining secularism as the toleration of all religions, and Hinduism as the only religion that is truly tolerant of other religions, only a Hindu-dominated country can be truly secular.<sup>11</sup> In this manner, any allegation of fundamentalism was deflected; in fact, it is this tolerant nature of Hinduism that has led to the risk of Muslim domination, and calls for more assertive action.

By constructing a discourse on the dangerous characteristics of the Muslim 'Other' that was the result of "Hindu tolerance and passivity,"<sup>12</sup> the Sangh Parivar was able to portray the demolition of the Babri Masjid as an assertion of the rights of the Hindu majority. Tolerance, a fundamental aspect of Hinduism became a threat to the religion because of "pseudo-secularism" and compensatory discrimination for religious minorities. The Muslim 'Other' was blamed for the violated rights of the

<sup>1</sup> Volunteers for temple construction. Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 162.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Van der Veer, "Riots and Rituals: The Construction of Violence and Public Space in Hindu Nationalism," in *Riots and Pogroms*, ed. Paul Brass (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 166.

<sup>3</sup> A detailed analysis of this case is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> Asghar Ali Engineer, "Hindu-Muslim Relations Before and After 1947," in *Anatomy of a Confrontation: The Babri Masjid- Ram Janmabhoomi Issue*, ed. Sarvepalli Gopal (New Delhi: Penguin Books India Ltd., 1991), 191.

<sup>5</sup> A detailed analysis of the Congress position is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>6</sup> Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, 185-186.

<sup>7</sup> Gerald James Larson, *India's Agony Over Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 227.

<sup>8</sup> Brenda Cossman and Ratna Kapur, *Secularism's Last Sigh? Hindutva and the (Mis)Rule of Law* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 56.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>12</sup> Zoya Hasan, "Community and Caste in Post-Congress Politics in Uttar Pradesh," *Community Conflicts and the State in India*, ed. Amrita Basu and Atul Kohli (New Delhi: Oxford University Press: 1998), 99.

Hindu community within the context of the privileging of minorities by the Congress government. The following passage indicates the growing dissatisfaction amongst the Hindu population that the Sangh Parivar instigated by drawing attention to the “alleged favoritism toward Muslims and the corresponding plight of the Hindu majority”<sup>13</sup>: “My numbers have dwindled... my adored motherland has been torn asunder... my temples have been desecrated, destroyed... you get my vote but you pamper those who attack me.”<sup>14</sup> The notion that invaders had destroyed Hindu temples is used to legitimate the destruction of a mosque to reclaim the public space that rightfully belonged to the Hindu majority. Muslims are portrayed as “attackers” here, thus calling for a strong Hindu response to prevent such attacks. It is evident from this passage that a sense of having been victimized was being created to gain support for the Ram Janmabhoomi movement.

Ram was constructed as the protector of Hinduism as the struggle between Ram and Ravana in the Ramayana was displaced by the struggle between Ram and the Muslim invader Babur,<sup>15</sup> whose presence the Babri Masjid articulated. Ram was no longer the incarnation of the Hindu God Vishnu for certain sects of Hindus: he was transformed into a national symbol through the “reimagined Indian landscape of Ram’s kingdom.”<sup>16</sup> The Sangh Parivar constructed this threat to Hinduism, the majority religion of India to create the idea that Hindu-ness or Hindutva was an essential aspect of Indian culture. The Babri Masjid came to be described as a stain of domination on India’s Hindu landscape; its removal would be the victorious removal of the stain left behind by Muslim invaders. The resurrection of the idea that Muslims are invaders and “tenants” in India reaffirms the notion that Hinduism is fundamentally tolerant for allowing Muslims to live in India. However it simultaneously reasserts that Babri Masjid is a symbol of domination that should be removed and replaced by a symbol of the Indian nation: a symbol of Hinduism. Ram represents “the essential Hinduness of Indian culture”<sup>17</sup> and becomes the ideal replacement for the threatening blot on India’s landscape. Primarily propounded by the VHP, the location of Ram at the core of Hinduism and the idea that “Sri Ram is the very existence of every Bharatiya”<sup>18</sup> gave a definitive structure to the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. By instigating the elimination of the threat to this inherent Indian-ness, the Sangh Parivar was able to inspire support for the Ram Janmabhoomi movement as a movement that protected Indian culture by virtue of protecting Ram.

The Hindutva movement gained support by portraying Hinduism as a culture and a “way of life” that was under threat due to “pseudo-secularism” and a demonic Muslim minority. The violence, intolerance and clear anti-secular aspects of the demolition of the Babri Masjid were covered up through this rhetoric and replaced by notions of fear and the need to protect Hinduism and Ram.

## THE MANIPULATION OF THE MEDIA

The transmission of “Hindu nationalism” through the mass media was a strategic tactic used by the Sangh Parivar to bring the Ram Janmabhoomi issue into the public sphere. The media reshape the context in which politics is conceived, enacted

and understood.<sup>19</sup> The use of national media to generate support for the Ram Janmabhoomi movement helped to transform the movement from one of religious significance to one of national, cultural significance.

The Ramayana epic was serialized on national television in India from January 1987 to August 1989. This broadcast overlapped with a crucial phase in the Ram Janmabhoomi movement to demolish the Babri Masjid and build a Ram temple in its place.<sup>20</sup> The movement had been a long-standing issue of importance for the VHP and the RSS, but only became part of the “official ideological inventory of the BJP” from July 1989.<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to note that after more than two years of constant public exposure to media emphasis on the Ramayana and the importance of Ram, the BJP finally acknowledged its support for this movement, indicating the significance of the use of the media to gain popularity for this movement.

The serial was widely popular across linguistically diverse regions of the country and became the public articulation of the relationship between Indian culture and the Hindu religion: A *Times of India* columnist wrote in September, 1989: “It is reassuring to know that at least 80 percent of this nation is ‘bondable’... As an Indian Hindu, I am relieved finally at sharing a common identity with millions within the privacy of my own home.”<sup>22</sup> The idea that the vastly diverse Indian public was able to share the Sunday morning ritual of watching the Ramayana together pre-empted the notion that the Ram Janmabhoomi movement was one that brought the entire country together, but also implied that the exclusion of non-Hindus was legitimate. The collective assertion of this common identity manifested itself in the demolition of the Babri Masjid. The fundamental aim of the Hindutva movement is the propagation of the revival of India as a Hindu nation<sup>23</sup> and creating a sense of unity amongst Hindus. As the above example illustrates, the Ramayana serial homogenized and nationalized the various versions of the Ramayana to create a sense of common identity.

Ramanand Sagar, the producer, director and script writer of the serial claims to have drawn his inspiration from Tulsidas’ Ramcharitmanas which rewrites Valmiki’s Ramayana during the Bhakti movement.<sup>24</sup> This locates the broad range of texts and performative traditions of the Ramayana in the context of India under Mughal rule,<sup>25</sup> and thus becomes a selective version of the Ramayana. Sagar addresses themes that are directly relevant to the Ram Janmabhoomi movement: for example, the significance Ram gives to the worship of his birthplace -- Ram performs a ritual of prayer and worship to “a portable piece of his birthplace.”<sup>26</sup> While this theme is absent from several other versions of the Ramayana, it becomes significant in the contemporary context of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement.

The result of this selective interpretation of the Ramayana was that it furthered the Sangh Parivar’s attempt to create a unified notion of Hindu tradition and thus portray Ram as a symbol of Indian culture. V.D. Sarvarkar’s text *Hindutva/Who is a Hindu?*, published in 1923, addresses this by constructing a notion of Hindu-ness

<sup>19</sup> Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics After Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public* (Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>21</sup> Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, 160.

<sup>22</sup> Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*, 94.

<sup>23</sup> Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds*, 244.

<sup>24</sup> Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*, 99.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>13</sup> Stanley Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 247.

<sup>14</sup> Hasan, “Community and Caste,” 99.

<sup>15</sup> Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, 176.

<sup>16</sup> Vernon Hewitt, *Political Mobilisation and Democracy in India: States of Emergency* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 183.

<sup>17</sup> Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, 174

<sup>18</sup> Cited in Ibid., 176

that has the components *rashtra-jati-sanskriti* (nation-race-culture).<sup>27</sup> By creating the idea of a Hindu race, with India as its holy land (in contrast to Muslims and Christians, whose holy land is elsewhere), Hindutva is able to exclude other religious groups from the nation and its culture. Without going into a more detailed discussion about Sarvarkar's work as the root of the current discourse of Hindutva, I would like to emphasize that the attempts to unify Hinduism invariably led to the exclusion of other religions. Additionally, the notion of a unified Hindu culture homogenizes and excludes different interpretations of Hinduism, as can clearly be seen in the televised serial of the Ramayana.

While the televised Ramayana was a fundamental site for the launching of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement in public, the Sangh Parivar also used the relationship between the English and Hindi language written media to further the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. The English language press, accessible only to a small, elite section of the Indian population "emphasized the truth-value of news as information serving a critical-rational public."<sup>28</sup> The Hindi medium press became an organizing ground for the Sangh Parivar because it portrayed issues of religion with familiarity and the Ram Janmabhoomi movement as a matter of faith for the Hindu majority.<sup>29</sup> The inability of the English language press to acknowledge the religious and cultural aspects of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement and its emphasis on the legal and political aspects worked to the advantage of the Sangh Parivar. They were able to use the reporting of the socio-cultural and religious aspects of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement to appeal to a large audience. The English media represented the very Western influences that Hindutva rejects; thus the opposition to the Ram Janmabhoomi movement in the English press reaffirmed the flaws in Western influences, in this case the language itself. The support the movement received in the Hindi press was indicative of a better understanding of the Hindu culture that the Sangh Parivar was trying to manufacture.

I have demonstrated how the national media (both television and written media) was successfully used to disseminate propaganda for the Ram Janmabhoomi movement and to mark its portrayals of Hinduism as a defense of Indian culture, legitimizing the demolition of the Babri Masjid.

## MASCULINITY AND THE HINDUTVA MOVEMENT

The British colonizers constructed India and its people as the 'other', enabling them "to control, contain and otherwise govern them (through superior knowledge and accommodating power)."<sup>30</sup> In the process, Hinduism and thus the Hindu male was feminized: "Hinduism is a female presence who is able... to battle and perhaps even threaten Western rationality, clearly a male in this encounter."<sup>31</sup> The unconventional methods of passive resistance, *Satyagraha* and *Ahimsa* (non-violence), primarily endorsed by Mahatma Gandhi in the Indian national movement, furthered notions of the Hindu man as effeminate. The Sangh Parivar exploited these past constructions of the effeminate Hindu male and used the rhetoric of masculinity to gain support for the Ram Janmabhoomi movement by portraying the demolition of the mosque as the reclaiming of Hindu male identity.

<sup>27</sup> John Zavos, "The Shapes of Hindu Nationalism," in *Coalition Politics and Hindu Nationalism*, eds. Katherine Adeney and Lawrence Saez (New York: Routledge, 2005), 41.

<sup>28</sup> Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*, 152.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>30</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978), 48.

<sup>31</sup> Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 86.

In his documentary film "The Father, Son and Holy War" Anand Patwardhan argues that the Sangh Parivar gained support for their Hindutva movement by urging Hindu men to disprove myths of their effeminate characteristics and impotency. The Hindutva movement is driven by the desire to disprove the myth of Hindu male impotency: the myth that because Muslims have a higher fertility rate and practice polygamy, the Muslim population of India will increase until Muslims are a majority in the future is extremely popular.<sup>32</sup> The Babri Masjid becomes the ground on which the Hindu male can assert himself by demolishing it and building a monument in honour of Ram. Ram himself is the symbol of the essential Hindu-ness of Indian culture and is portrayed in a highly militaristic manner: he is depicted as a warrior "with a bow and arrow and in heroic postures with a bare, muscular chest."<sup>33</sup> As descendants of Shri Ram, every Hindu thus becomes obligated to follow the tradition of being a warrior and protecting what is rightfully theirs.<sup>34</sup> The Ram Janmabhoomi movement is no longer a question of religion: it becomes a question of upholding masculinity. The virtues of tolerance and patience that are regarded as inherent to Hinduism are feminine, and "qualities of manhood" such as anger and aggression are idealized.<sup>35</sup>

I would now like to discuss how the "shakha" emerged as the location for the training of *kar sevaks* and the transmission of the idea of the ideal Hindu male-ness. Within the Sangh Parivar, "discipline remains the most central symbolic construction."<sup>36</sup> The Shakha is an organization where this ideal of discipline can be cultivated through the "training of 'mind, body and intellect.'"<sup>37</sup> While the RSS has described the Shakha as falling within the Hindu (and Buddhist) *akhara* or gymnasium tradition, this view has been rejected by critics.<sup>38</sup> The shakha has several functions: in the absence of women, it redirects sexual energy to the service of the motherland.<sup>39</sup> The Babri Masjid is a symbol of foreign invasion, thus a symbol of the "rape of the motherland" that the "sons of Bharat" must destroy to restore honor to the motherland. Furthermore, the "Bharatiya games" and physical exercises such as "wielding the lathi, Suryanamaskar, marching"<sup>40</sup> emphasize the importance of physical strength as an aspect of masculinity. *Swayamsevaks*, or volunteers, are indoctrinated into the ideas of Hindutva from childhood; thus the RSS ensures that the Sangh Parivar has a willing, organized, and well-prepared army, eager to defend their motherland when called upon.

Other images and the rhetoric of masculinity were being circulated as the Ram Janmabhoomi gained momentum. In Maharashtra, Shiva-ji, a Maratha warrior was being hailed as the "creator of Maharashtra" and the "protector against Muslims" by the Shiv Sena, the then-ruling political party. Visual assertions of male strength and power were articulated through "body-building" competitions between men and adult films about rape and violent love.<sup>41</sup>

The Ram Janmabhoomi movement was thus not merely religious; it was an

<sup>32</sup> Chetan Batt, *Hindu Nationalism: Origins, Ideologies and Modern Myths* (Oxford: Berg, Oxford International Publishers Ltd., 2001), 197.

<sup>33</sup> Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, 174-177.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>35</sup> Neeladri Bhattacharya, "Myth, History and the Politics of Ramjanmabhumi," in *Anatomy of a Confrontation: The Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhumi Issue*, ed Sarvepalli Gopal, (New Delhi: Penguin Books India Ltd., 1991), 128.

<sup>36</sup> Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, 111.

<sup>37</sup> Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism*, 142.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>39</sup> Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, 112.

<sup>40</sup> Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism*, 142.

<sup>41</sup> Anand Patwardhan, *The Father, Son and Holy War* (1994).

organized attempt to disprove myths of Hindu male impotency and effeminateness. By organizing and disciplining men in shakhas, the Sangh Parivar was able to launch the movement as a protective act of duty toward the motherland, lauding the violence that the demolition of the mosque would cause as an assertion of masculinity. Protecting the motherland was a critical aspect to protecting Indian culture and thus legitimized the widespread riots and violence caused by the demolition.

#### THE RITUALIZATION OF THE RAM JANMABHOOMI MOVEMENT

Ayodhya has been the focal point of many religions, a site for pilgrimages and religious rituals with Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Islam flourishing concurrently due to the significant presence of several temples and mosques.<sup>42</sup> I would like to examine how Ayodhya as a location of the religious ritual of pilgrimage was converted into a site for religious violence while still maintaining its significance as a national holy site. The nationalization of “Hindu-Muslim antagonism by organizing processions with violent implications undoubtedly reached its height on the occasion of the *Rath Yatra*<sup>43</sup> of L. K. Advani in the autumn of 1990,<sup>44</sup> therefore I will primarily analyze the significance of this ritual. The Rath Yatra entailed covering 10,000 kilometers from the Somnath temple in Gujarat to Ayodhya.<sup>45</sup> The long distance traveled to reach a holy site resonated with the significance of Hindu pilgrimages.

Pilgrimage is often seen to reflect “a supra-local level of integration”<sup>46</sup> and reinforces notions of a wider community. The VHP manipulated the sense of community that pilgrimages provided by staging the “Ekatmatayajna”, a procession for national unity in 1983,<sup>47</sup> one of the earlier movements to destroy the Babri Masjid and reclaim Ram’s birthplace. According to Van der Veer, “What theories of pilgrimage which emphasize integration tend to neglect is that violent antagonism may be an important mechanism of integration.”<sup>48</sup> In the case of the Rath Yatra to Ayodhya, the focus of the pilgrimage itself was to exclude the Muslim ‘Other’ and eliminate the presence of the mosque, an unwanted “stain” from the Hindu landscape of the nation. The construction of public space occurs through the processes of ritual and rioting.<sup>49</sup> The Babri Masjid, formerly public space, is reconstructed as Hindu space, and thus becomes the perfect site at which organized ritual turns to organized rioting. The false historical claim that the mosque is built on Ram Janmasthan (birthplace) is used to heighten the contestation of this public space.

Christophe Jaffrelot advances the argument that “the instrumentalization of religious processions by ideologically minded leaders largely explains the way rituals have become conducive to communal riots.”<sup>50</sup> In the case of the Ramjanmabhoomi movement, the role played by the leaders of the Sangh Parivar, the “ideologically minded leaders,” is to evoke images that reverberate with Hindu rituals in India. The use of images of ritual is what legitimizes the simultaneous launching of riots because the violence is for the sake of religion. The 1990 BJP campaign, launched as a *Rath Yatra*, used the image of a chariot (Rath), an important aspect of festivals in India. The

image of the chariot also evoked the militancy of the war-chariot used in the Bhagvat Gita by Arjuna. The DCM-Toyota used by L.K. Advani was decorated to resemble Arjuna’s chariot, which had appeared in the televised version of the Mahabharata broadcast from 1988 to 1990.<sup>51</sup> This strategic use of a religious symbol that the public had received constant exposure to on television legitimized the violence that accompanied the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. Another symbol used during the procession was the water-pot (kalasha), a symbol of power and auspiciousness.<sup>52</sup> The water was from the river Ganges, symbolizing the unity of Hindu India with its sacred, purifying water. These symbols of Hindu ritual served as a symbol of integration of the Hindu population, but excluded the Muslim Other.<sup>53</sup> Symbols of religious rituals created the illusion that the Ram Janmabhoomi movement was a pilgrimage, not a violent movement. The processions were accompanied with slogans such as “Maareng, Mar Jayenge, Hum Mandir Vahin Banayenge” (We will kill, we will be killed, but we will build the temple there).<sup>54</sup> Such slogans conflate the temple, a symbol of religious ritual with killing and thus make it impossible to distinguish between the entire movement as a pilgrimage or as a riot. The Sangh Parivar wanted to eliminate any separation of religious ritual from the movement to ensure that the kar sevaks remained motivated in their goal to destroy the Babri Masjid and replace it with a Ram temple. Advani’s Rath Yatra is significant for several reasons: it was a public display of the BJP’s support for the Ramjanmabhoomi movement that was very high on the agenda of the VHP, the RSS, and the rest of the Sangh Parivar. His decision to launch the Rath Yatra “relate(s) to the Hindu vote bank that the BJP (and the VHP) had been cultivating since the mid-1980s.”<sup>55</sup> Additionally, the VHP simultaneously launched the Ram Jyoti Yatra,<sup>56</sup> heightening the communal tension of the Rath Yatra, ensuring that despite Advani’s arrest in Bihar, tens of thousands of VHP militants still reached Ayodhya on October 30<sup>th</sup> “to accomplish the announced kar seva.”<sup>57</sup> The significance of the Rath Yatra is that it indicates the BJP’s willingness to use religious ritual to incite political violence and had several implications for its future political career.

In his documentary film “Rāma ke nāma,” Patwardhan illustrates that the Rath Yatra to Ayodhya on October 30<sup>th</sup> 1990 was on the same day that the festival of Parikrama was being celebrated. This made it difficult to distinguish between the devotees who were celebrating Parikrama and the kar sevaks. While several people he interviewed expressed dissatisfaction at this convenient coincidence, it resulted in the heightening of religious tensions during the festival. It disrupted a tradition of religious tolerance, because Muslims who had previously participated in Parikrama and were now forced to witness a pilgrimage that attempted to exclude them from the nation. This is a clear indication that the deliberate choice made by political leaders was to turn a site of ritual into one of violence to “polarize the electorate” so that the Hindu majority would feel ‘more Hindu’ and vote for the BJP.<sup>58</sup>

The transportation of sacred bricks to Ayodhya that would be used to construct a Ram Mandir (temple) after the demolition of the mosque also marked the ritualization of the movement. The bricks were stamped with the name “Ram” and were sanctified

42 K. N. Panikkar, “A Historical Overview,” in *Anatomy of a Confrontation: The Babri Masjid- Ram Janmabhumi Issue*, ed. Sarvepalli Gopal. (New Delhi: Penguin Books India Ltd., 1991), 25.

43 A chariot procession

44 Christophe Jaffrelot, “The Politics of Processions and Hindu-Muslim Riots,” in *Community Conflicts and the State in India*, 81.

45 Ibid.

46 Van der Veer, “Riots and Rituals,” 155.

47 Ibid., 167.

48 Ibid., 156.

49 Ibid., 155.

50 Jaffrelot, “The Politics of Processions and Hindu-Muslim Riots,” 61.

51 Ibid., 82.

52 Van der Veer, “Riots and Rituals,” 168.

53 Ibid.

54 Patwardhan, *The Father, Son and Holy War* (1994).

55 Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism*, 171.

56 pilgrimage of light in honour of Ram (Jaffrelot, “The Politics of Processions and Hindu-Muslim Riots,” 82).

57 Ibid., 83.

58 Ibid., 80.

through a sacred Hindu ritual of worship (puja).<sup>59</sup> As reported by a VHP activist, a respected elderly person in the village performed the puja: “to apply turmeric paste, put flowers and burn incense sticks.”<sup>60</sup> These actions are all part of Hindu ritual. Furthermore, they did not bear specific characteristics to specific sects of Hinduism: they took on a generalized, nationalized form that emerged from Hindutva ideology. By allowing the VHP to undertake the Ram Shila Puja to take place to appease the dissatisfied elements of the Hindu population,<sup>61</sup> the Congress paved the way for the Ram Janmabhoomi movement without actually participating in it. The puja of the bricks pre-empted the demolition of the mosque and simultaneously justified it because the bricks were a tangible manifestation of the sacred monument that would replace the mosque.

Through the ritualization of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, the Sangh Parivar was attempting to reclaim public space as imagined national space for the Hindu community.<sup>62</sup> The series of pilgrimages to Ayodhya, significantly L.K. Advani’s Rath Yatra, as well as the Ram Shila Pujan made Babri Masjid a legitimate site for violence because of its religious significance.

#### THE DEMOLITION AND ITS AFTERMATH

On the day of the demolition itself, “as mahants, pandits and sadhus were getting ready to start the puja on the newly built temple to Ram, the Babri Masjid was demolished by kar sevaks.”<sup>63</sup> Men of immense religious authority were thus justifying and sacralizing the acts of violence and destruction being conducted by the kar sevaks. Although it was denied by prominent leaders of the BJP, “evidence of preparations for the demolition among the rank and file... was preceded by an immense massing at Ayodhya of leaders, activists and workers of the Sangh Parivar.”<sup>64</sup> It is commonly held that the movement “was planned and even rehearsed” by the VHP and RSS, with BJP leaders included later; however, once the demolition began, no single party could be blamed because the kar sevaks executed the task they had been indoctrinated to carry out: they were “out of control.”<sup>65</sup> Kalyan Singh, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, had ordered that the structure be protected, but that there must be no police firing. The central government “did not dare to use force to stop the demolition, clearing, leveling and construction of a temporary new temple on the spot.”<sup>66</sup> Police and armed personnel were heard telling the kar sevaks to hurry up with the demolition.<sup>67</sup> The responses of Kalyan Singh, but more significantly, of the central government, indicates that the Congress had no intentions of acting with enough urgency to prevent the demolition. Mark Tully, a B.B.C. reporter said, “No Government could afford to fire on Hindus in Ayodhya.”<sup>68</sup> However, I would like to point out that Congress was unwilling to face the Hindu backlash if it *did* respond to the demolition actively; thus, out of a lack of political will and integrity, it did nothing.

The demolition of the Babri Masjid plunged the entire nation into the worst

outbreak of sectarian violence since the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984.<sup>69</sup> The demolition was followed by large-scale riots all over the country: by December 11, the death toll had reached 900 and was still mounting.<sup>70</sup> BJP-run state governments were dismissed in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Himachal Pradesh on the grounds that they were unable to prevent widespread riots.<sup>71</sup> The RSS, VHP and Bajrang Dal were banned; however these bans were lifted because the high courts ruled that Bajrang Dal and RSS were cultural organizations and could not be banned for political purposes.<sup>72</sup> Although the political bans at first indicate congressional dissent at the demolition, the lifting of the bans and the granting of bail to several VHP and RSS leaders implies the hesitance of the Congress about taking a firm stand on the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. Its relatively weak policy reaffirms that the Congress wanted to allow the momentum of Hindutva to build up and did not attempt to prevent the demolition.

New elections in the four states and the Delhi area were held in November 1993, but the BJP only won in Rajasthan and the Delhi area.<sup>73</sup> This indicated to the BJP that antagonizing Muslims was not sufficient to bring them to power, although it cannot be denied that it gave the BJP an advantage in winning upper-caste voters. Paradoxically, for some Muslims, the BJP’s hostility towards them was an indication of strict adherence to a political agenda, “as opposed to the Congress’s duplicity.”<sup>74</sup> Consequently, the lack of Muslim trust in Narasimha Rao’s government became an advantage for the BJP. After their defeat in 1993, the BJP began adopting new strategies and balancing the proportion of upper-caste members to members of other castes, but this has led to an increasing ideological divide between the BJP and the VHP/RSS. In 1996, the BJP secured 161 seats in the Lok Sabha, emerging as the single largest party,<sup>75</sup> a steep increase from the 85 seats it won in 1989.<sup>76</sup> Although the coalition government it formed resigned within 13 days, the victory indicated an irreversible change in Indian politics and the emersion of a new era of communalism. The BJP tempered its perpetuation of a staunch Hindutva rhetoric, which ultimately led to its victory in the national elections in 1998.

#### CONCLUSION

In reference to the VHP’s cow protection movement, van der Veer has argued that the movement was neither a religious reform movement nor a nationalist movement: it was a campaign that functioned as an interface between them.<sup>77</sup> The same argument is relevant to the Ram Janmabhoomi movement; it equated ideas of Indian cultural identity and nationalism with Hinduism. The concrete act of destroying the Babri Masjid was a public assertion of this new national identity that portrayed the Hindu religion through the Hindutva ideal of “nation-race-culture.” I have examined four

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>60</sup> Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, 162.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>63</sup> Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds*, 249.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Hewitt, *Political Mobilisation and Democracy in India*, 186.

<sup>66</sup> Malkani, *The Politics of Ayodhya & Hindu-Muslim Relations*, 8.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>68</sup> Malkani, *The Politics of Ayodhya*, 8.

<sup>69</sup> Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds*, 251.

<sup>70</sup> Jayati Chaturvedi and Gyaneshwar Chaturvedi, “Dharma Yudh: Communal Violence, Riots and Public Space in Hindu Nationalism,” in *Riots and Pogroms*, 186.

<sup>71</sup> Larson, *India’s Agony over Religion*, 274.

<sup>72</sup> Hewitt, *Political Mobilisation and Democracy in India*, 187.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>74</sup> Jasmine Zerini-Brotel, “The BJP in Uttar Pradesh: From Hindutva to Consensual Politics,” in *The BJP and the Compulsions of Politics in India*, eds. Thomas Hansen and Christophe Jaffrelot (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 94.

<sup>75</sup> Hewitt, *Political Mobilisation and Democracy in India*, 189.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>77</sup> Therese O’Toole, “Secularizing the Sacred Cow: The Relationship between Religious Reform and Hindu Nationalism,” in *Hinduism in Public and Private*, ed. Anthony Copley (New Delhi: Oxford University Press; 2003), 84-85.

of the ways in which the Sangh Parivar was able to execute the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. Public manifestations of the Sangh Parivar's Hindutva ideology, whether in the form of a perceived threat to Hinduism from other religions, mass media propaganda, issues of masculinity, or the ritualization of violence, culminated in the demolition of the Babri Masjid. More than fifteen years later, the final decision as to whether a new mosque or a new temple is to be built has still not been made. The unresolved dispute remains a tool of political leverage during communal violence and is frequently manipulated to generate further division between India's Hindus and Muslims.

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