Kathryn Burns, Colonial Habits: Convents and the Spiritual Economy of Cuzco, Peru

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Book Reviews


In a well-researched and carefully considered study, Kathryn Burns makes a serious case for the important role cloistered nuns played as the center of economic and spiritual life in colonial Cuzco from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, a role that remains influential to this day. The three convents in that city, Santa Clara (1558), Santa Catalina (1605), and Santa Teresa (1673), were vital to securing Spanish hegemony and to building a colonial regime based on interrelationships among Spaniards, Creoles, and *kurakas*, which resulted in a divided elite. The ensuing class and economic structures mirrored those of the aristocracy in Spain.

Mostly through dowries, liens, and endowments, the nuns acquired property which they used, in turn, to provide credit to local borrowers. The relationship between lenders and borrowers led both to Spanish control of the territory and protection of religious institutions. Ironically, in order to pursue lives of religious poverty, the nuns became participants in the revamping of property rights in the Andes by cementing alliances between the wealthy and local authorities. This study reconciles ownership of property and the vow of poverty, claiming that property hinged on the issue of *dominio*, or sovereignty. The convent, not an individual nun, owned property, and the resulting income guaranteed the sustenance of the community as a whole.

The association between the nuns and borrowers was not merely an economic convenience but also a spiritual sustenance. Burns coins the term "spiritual economy" to argue the alliance between credit mechanisms of the secular world and the prayer life of the nuns. Property and assets in exchange for prayers was often a contractual agreement. In some cases economic determinants did benefit individual nuns, permitting the creation and maintenance of thriving households within the walls of the convents—a situation which aided in the process of social and spiritual development in Cuzco.

Spanish conquistadors founded convents to protect and educate their daughters and place "unruly" women in seclusion. Women of wealth would finance a foundation as a refuge for their later years. Burns presents the existence of a class structure in the convents resulting in distinctions among Spaniards, *criollas*, and the descendants of Incas and *kuracas*. Convent life
existed to support society and would eventually be structured according to
society's values. Class determined who would take the black or the white
veil. In attempting to seclude themselves from the world, the nuns fell into a
structure that made them a vital part of secular society.

Presenting the intricacies of investments and conventual
relationships as tightly linked, Burns shows that both thrived while the
economy flourished. By the late 1700s, as the economy faltered, the convents
became symbols of decay. While recognizing that, at the end of the colonial
period and during the rise of the republican order, the old bonds of the
spiritual economy were entirely destroyed, Burns argues that the "spiritual
economy" of Cuzco had not eaded. To this day, the "city's most prosperous
families still cultivate good relations with...cloistered nuns, even though the
spiritual and economic goals...have long been split apart, and the means for
satisfying them greatly diversified" (p. 215).

Especially helpful are the conclusions at the end of each chapter
which summarize the main terets. Colonial Habits is a highly readable work
that introduces valuable historical data and provides a fascinating analysis of
the economy and spiritual interests in colonial Cuzco.

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