This week, from April 10th to April 17th, is the celebration of the Holy Week in the Christian world. In Latin America and the Caribbean, this religious festivity, as with most of the Catholic rituals celebrated in the region, must be read under the light of the historical process of colonization.

Latin America and the Caribbean is defined, in a great part, by Mestizaje. Mestizaje is a social process of encounters, beyond people's skin color, which includes encounters and struggles involving identity, beliefs, practices, power structures, and knowledges (See resources on mestizaje [here](#)). As a mestiza myself, I have been fascinated with noticing how religious practices and rituals contain and express very vividly the mixed nature of the region.

In fact, colonizing the spiritual beliefs of native communities was one of the most important strategies throughout the colonization of Latin America. Catholicism was carried by the colonizers as the religion of “civilization”, and only through evangelization would indigenous people overcome “savagery”. With this mindset, indigenous communities across a great portion of the continent were evangelized through a process called “reduction”. This referred to progressively converting native peoples to Catholicism in places called “missions”, which gathered the native communities for evangelization, agricultural production, crafts and construction. Evangelization took place through preaching the bible, instruction, and also through coercion. Natives would be forbidden to speak in their languages and their temples would be destroyed, among other practices of colonization. These missions were conducted mainly by Franciscan and Jesuit religious communities, and were particularly strong in the Andes (Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, northern Chile and Argentina), Paraguay and northern Brazil. Similar missions were also established in Central and North America, up
to today’s Arizona, New Mexico and Texas (More information here). These missions grew almost like towns, and developed as agricultural and economic centers.

These practices extended from the early colonial times in the 1500s until the mid 1700s. The Jesuits were expelled from the Spanish empire around 1768. However, in some regions, similar practices of evangelization survived until the early 1800s (Read about the Jesuits in Latin America here. Additional resources at the library here).

As is the case with other cultures that have gone through colonization, mixed beliefs and practices that blend elements from native and colonial traditions emerged in Latin America. At a religious level, rituals vividly reveal this process of mestizaje. Academic interpretations on how and why this mixture of beliefs took place, and of how this process dialogues with particular characteristics of each community, are too varied and extended to discuss here (See some resources here). The fact is that religious traditions become adapted to the cultures where they were installed. As an act of survival and, perhaps, resistance, native communities in Latin America appropriated these rituals and maintained elements from their own tradition despite colonization. Examples of this are the celebration of the Virgin of Candelaria. This Virgin is considered the patron saint of several towns across Latin America. In Paucartambo (in Cuzco, Peru), the Virgin of Candelaria is also known as “Mamacha Candelaria”, a term and a celebration which draws from native Andean religiosity.

Through a history of colonization, appropriation and syncretism, religiosity in Latin America has historically been experienced with passion and intensity. Therefore, the celebration of the Holy Week is a major celebration across the region.

Unlike the egg hunting celebration of the United States, the holy week of the Catholic tradition is heavily charged with a spirit of penitence and renewal. This is tied to both the Roman prosecution of Jesus, and the betrayal which lead to Jesus’ torture and crucifixion. The basic structure of holy week celebration in catholic countries which were Spanish colonies usually involves processions showing Jesus and Mary’s suffering: Starting on Palm Sunday with his entry to the city of Jerusalem where he
was received as the son of God; through to Holy Friday, the passion, where he is crucified; and finally ending on Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday. Holy Friday, or Good Friday, is when the largest amount of processions take place, representing several stations from Jesus’ apprehension to his crucifixion. These biblical episodes are recreated as processions, each with vivid displays of statues and enacted representations, such as Christ’s imprisonment and execution, and the celebration of his resurrection. This is called Viacrucis.

Huge statues of saints are carried in procession, usually by men paying promises to them, and taken from churches into the streets, followed by believers. While maintaining these basic patterns, there are a great spectrum of variations of the kinds of displays and additional rites that have evolved in different communities.

The ritual celebrations of the Viacrucis in Popayan, Colombia, for example, are a very classic representation of the processions that take place in Spain, the country where the tradition first originated. The Judios de Masatete in Nicaragua and the Borrados in Nayarit, Mexico, on the other hand, demonstrate how the incorporation of native traditions and local culture can result in a very different representation of the same celebration. Another example is the lake Cocibolca in Nicaragua, where the procession is adapted to water with canoes.

These are just a few examples of the wide diversity of religious syncretism and celebrations that take place in Latin America which are strongly expressed during the period known as Holy Week. Countries like Mexico and Guatemala also present a rich variety of cultural expressions through Catholic rituals; while in Brazil and the Caribbean the Spanish and indigenous traditions blend together amidst a strong African influence.

If you are interested about these processes of mestizaje in Latin America and its manifestation on spiritual practices, we invite you to consult books as "South and Meso-American native spirituality: from the cult of the feathered serpent to the theology of liberation". If you are fluent in Spanish you can also take a look at "Religiones y culturas: perspectivas latinoamericanas". The library holds a large collection on Latin American cultures and religious traditions, as well as on Catholicism in that region. In addition, we invite you to visit out International and Area Studies Library, and bring your questions to our Librarian on Latin America and the Caribbean, Dr. Antonio Sotomayor.
SYNCRETISM IN AFRICA

https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1107&context=totem
SIKHISM

WEDNESDAY JULY 10TH, 2013 BY LAURE CURIEN

Sikhism: a religion between Hinduism and Islam
TRANSLATED BY MAXENCE SALENDRE

Recognised as the fifth religion in the world, very few people know about Sikhism. Sikhs precepts thrived under the influence of Gurû Nanak in 16th century North-West India. It was developed as an answer to the two majoritarian religions in India: Hinduism and Islam. Learn about this religion of 20 million adepts, advocating equality between men.

Sikhism today counts more than 20 million disciples referred to as "Sikhs". It does not matter what is the adept’s race, nationality, cast or gender, as Sikhism strongly fights racial and social discriminations. Its adepts are easily recognisable to their turban and long beards, symbol of resistance against the persecutions they underwent from Hindus and Muslims in the 17th century. They are also distinguishable from the names they give themselves: Singh ("lion") for a man and Kaur ("princess") for a woman.

Born Hindi, Gurû Nanak was raised in a cast of merchants near Lahore in Pakistan. Living in permanent contact with Hinduism and Islam, he was neither convinced nor converted to one or the other, though he remained fascinated by spirituality. He considered religion a way to unite men. After a 20 year-long spiritual trip which took him from India to Nepal, Tibet, Sri Lanka, Mecca, Persia and Afghanistan, he founded Kartarpur “the city of the Creator” on his return. He gathered a community with “no Hindi or Muslim”, in Punjabi, on the right bank of the river Ravi in current Pakistan.

Gurû Nanak founded Sikh philosophy after a revelation from Waheguru (God). It is a true spiritual teaching developed within the Hindi tradition of “bhakti” (devotion). The guru assembles around him a community worshipping a unique and absolute God which represents the Truth. According to this belief, human race on Earth originates from this Creator, not because he casted them there after the original sin, but rather to help them “grow” within Sikh principles.

BETWEEN INDIA AND PAKISTAN: TEN GURUS, 5 “K”

Before dying, Gurû Nanak had named his successor. Living examples of spirituality, nine gurus followed him to lead the congregation until 1708. The tenth guru, Gobind Singh, decided he would be the last and that religious authority would then be transmitted by the assembled Sikh community and the scriptures left by the five first gurus. As all religion, Sikhism has its own sacred book called Adi Granth.

Each guru participated in the development of the religion. Arjun Dev, the fifth guru, gave the Sikhs their holy place, the Golden Temple of Amritsar. The last and tenth guru, Gobind Singh, introduced a Sikh initiation ritual guaranteeing entrance in the “khalsa” ("the Pure"). This ritual forces men to respect the “5K”, the five distinctive signs of the Sikhs: the Kirpan, a double-edge dagger worn in remembrance of the values of duty and sacrifice for a fair cause; the Kesha, a tradition which urges men to constantly wear the Pagri – a turban – to hold their long hair; the Kangha (a comb); the Kara (an iron bracelet) and the Kaccha (short boxer shorts). Once the first five Sikhs were baptised, these “five Beloved" baptised the guru for the first time in the long history of religions.

From the 18th century until India’s independence in 1947, the history of the Sikh community is marked by rebellions and armed conflicts. The last guru led the Sikhs to wage war against the Moghols to put an end to the persecutions they were victims of. “Nothing prevents a man from drawing his sword once all other alternatives have been used”. Islam was well implanted in this region however it risked...
being surpassed by Sikhism. In the late 17th century, the pacifism advocated by Gurū Nānak was let aside in favour of armed conflict.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who had been withdrawn in the Punjabi mountains since 1716, decides in 1750 to create an independent Sikh territory on his lands. An autonomous state which existed for half a century until the British decided to annex it. In 1919, the British slaughter Sikh adepts in the Golden Temple putting an end to their mutual cooperation. The number of persecutions increased during the Indian independence war: many Sikhs were killed, imprisoned or tortured. When, eventually, India became independent in 1947, the partition did not take into account the Sikh territory as Punjabi was divided between India and Pakistan. As soon as 1966, Indian Punjabi was again divided into three parts: Himachal Pradesh, Haryana and Punjabi – where a majority of Sikhs still live today.

Independence claims from fundamentalist Sikh movements led, in 1984, to a violent and bloody repression from the Indian army in the Golden Temple. Indira Gandhi, then Prime Minister, was killed, in an act of revenge, by two Sikh bodyguards. Four days of massacre followed in Delhi where more than 300 died.

THE SIKH DOCTRINE

Sikhism is closer to Hinduism than Islam as it retains Hindi theories of karma and reincarnation, even though Sikhism foundations are closer to Islam as it advocates monotheism. To believe in a unique God who represents the Truth, learn to read and understand the Gurmukhi or protect the poors, the weak and the oppressed by opposing injustice are strong principles of the Sikh religion.

Sikh disciples are invited to lead a true life i.e. to be honest, integer and submissive to God's words in order to reach the “mukti” or “Liberation”. Have a life in conformity with your beliefs mean having a healthy life and healthy eating habits: alcohol, tobacco or lottery games are forbidden. By living a life of exchange and sharing, the adept can reach the ultimate goal of life: become a “sachiar” or, in other words, “grow by yourself”. Up early in the morning, they meditate God's words. No idols, no goddess, only God, incarnated in everything. “I am Him. I, myself, am God”. The majority of Sikhs still live in Punjabi, their homeland.