

A Tale of Misunderstanding: Caddo Gender Norms and Spanish Proselytization

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Faculty Introduction

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Heather Sellers' essay argues that Caddos, the Indigenous people of present-day East Texas, possessed a matrilineal kinship system that ensured Caddo women's high status and informed Caddo diplomacy. When Spaniards colonized East Texas, Caddos insisted that colonizers adhere to Indigenous diplomatic protocols requiring the establishment of fictive kin bonds through Caddo women. For their part, Spanish colonizers displayed "devotion" to the only female figure in their company, the Virgin of Guadalupe, leading to a series of creative misunderstandings. Caddos and Spaniards initially found common ground through an apparent shared veneration of women, but relations quickly soured as Spanish disrespect for Caddo women's political roles uncovered irreconcilable differences. The essay contributes to scholarship on Indigenous women's roles in early American history. Scholars like Sellers face a double dilemma: colonial archives rarely record the voices of Native Americans. When they do, those voices usually belong to Native men. Sellers overcomes that dilemma by practicing ethnohistory, a discipline that blends techniques from the fields of history, anthropology, and archaeology.

Abstract

The Caddo nation was the dominant Indigenous group in modern East Texas from the late 1600s to the late 1700s, making them a highly sought-after alliance for Spanish colonizers and missionaries. Interactions between the two nations began with complex greeting rituals, reciprocal respect, and perceived commonality. This paper asserts that the conflated cohesion of Spanish reverence for the Virgin Mary and the esteem for women in Caddo communities was a fundamental component of the original alliance. Therefore, Spanish misunderstanding of Caddo culture, particularly in relation to Caddo women's political roles, was a major factor in the deterioration of their favorable relationship. In the past 15 years, scholars have begun to understand the positions and influence held by Caddo women during the colonization period. It is essential to further examine the impact of female influence on European and Indigenous exchanges, both political and religious.

European colonizers in the Spanish Borderlands believed that the essential component needed to achieve imperial supremacy for their nations in the 1600s and 1700s was alliances with Native people. Though Spanish motivations for colonization have often been boiled down to God, gold, and glory, Spaniards were acutely aware of the need for effective diplomacy with the Indigenous Caddo people of modern-day East Texas, northwest Louisiana, southeast Oklahoma, and western Arkansas. Matrilineal kinship, longstanding reverence for women, and complex greeting rituals primed the Caddo to accept friendship and assume commonality with Spanish missionaries as they entered with their banners and apparent devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe who appeared to be a representative of their peaceful intentions. A generation of scholars, from the 1990s to the early 2000s, recorded the creative lengths both parties would go to attempt alliance and understanding despite mutual misunderstanding.¹ Like French and English colonizers on the east coast of the present-day United States, the Spanish had a flawed perception of Caddo culture, particularly in relation to women's political roles. It is only in the past 15 years that scholars have begun to comprehend the crucial role of Indigenous women in politics in the Native South in contrast to the typical marginalization of women from Europe.²

An alliance with the Caddo, the dominant Indigenous group in the region, was imperative for Spain's successful colonization. The Caddo's sizable, stable population provided a significant missionization opportunity for the Spanish. Caddo refers not only to a people group, but to an entire shared language family.³ The Caddo language provided the state of Texas with its name. However, the word *texas*, or *tejas*, was not originally used for naming the territory. Instead, Native American polities in the Neches and Angelina valleys used it as a casual greeting amongst themselves, with a literal meaning of friends or allies.⁴ Having heard it from the Natives, the Spanish used the greeting, particularly in

¹ Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815*. 2nd ed. of *Studies in North American Indian History* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

² Elizabeth N. Ellis, *The Great Power of Small Nations: Indigenous Diplomacy in the Gulf South* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023).

³ Herbert E. Bolton, "The Native Tribes about the East Texas Missions," *The Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association* 11, no. 4 (1908): 250.

⁴ Bolton, "Native Tribes," 252.

engaged in a “far-reaching commercial exchange system trading hides, salt, turquoise, copper, marine shells, bows, and ceramic pottery long distances into and out of the regions of New Mexico, the Gulf coast, and the Great Lakes.”⁸ Trade with Europeans was acceptable but not required for a thriving Caddo economy.

The social structure of the Caddo could be defined as hierarchical, matrilineal, and theocratic. There were three main social classes: village leadership (the *caddi*) who inherited their position, the elite who served as civil officers or slightly lower religious leadership, and commoners. All three classes were under the *xinesi* who had civil and religious authority over the entire Caddo confederacy.⁹ Contrary to common marital traditions within the community, leaders participated only in monogamous marriages. The wives of the *xinesi* and the *caddi* were referred to under the title *aquidan*.¹⁰ Respect for wives of leaders and women in general was born from the balanced kinship system within the Caddo nation. Religious and political leadership were held by men and passed down to a male relative. However, the man who inherited the leadership was usually the son of a female relative rather than the son, nephew, or cousin from the male leader’s bloodline.¹¹

Economically, Caddo women exhibited a great deal of control over their society through their leadership in agriculture that sustained the communities. Ceremonies centered around planting required female involvement in the form of gathering and creating mats that the religious and political leaders would submit to the temple fire. Those offerings ensured good crops and solidified the female contributions and thereby their position within *Hasinai* society.¹² Unfortunately, Spanish men struggled to see the significance of Caddo women’s contributions because they were so focused on what they considered to be inappropriate behavior for women.

The inability to see past European conventions of appearance and conduct of women was a direct reflection of Spanish society’s extremely specific ideas related to women’s virtue. Primarily, female honor stemmed from

⁸ Juliana Barr, *Peace Came in the Form of a Woman: Indians and Spaniards in the Texas Borderlands* (The University of North Carolina, 2007), 21.

⁹ George Sabo, “Rituals of Encounter: Interpreting Native American Views of European Explorers,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (1992): 65.

¹⁰ Jesus Maria, *Descriptions I*, 216.

¹¹ Barr, *Peace*, 21 and 29.

¹² Barr, 62.

the woman's sexual chastity, modesty of dress, and the protection of her reputation. All achievements for Spanish women were "associated with their husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers, and these in turn reflected the man's position in his community's sociopolitical hierarchy."¹³ This was a stark difference from Caddo communities where married men and women shared social status based on the contributions made to the family and the nation. In fact, due to matrilineal kinship traditions, the men counted the woman's family they married into as equally vital to their achievement as the victories they had in battle or hunting. It was not the woman's chastity or appearance that decided if a marriage was viable, but rather a man's ability to care for and protect her.

In addition, Spanish culture was heavily centered around Catholicism. Through diaries and letters from missionaries and military leaders alike, the focus on faith is clear. Captain Domingo Ramón and Fray Isidro Félix de Espinosa journeyed through Texas together in 1716, helping to establish missions, and recording the process as they went. These records provided a glimpse into the importance of faith-based traditions. Espinosa explained, "We stopped to celebrate. Seven Masses were said, several people took communion, and, in the afternoon, with general rejoicing, we carried in procession a sacred cross we had made."¹⁴ Diary entry after diary entry indicates Masses were said, sermons were preached, and then the traveling could begin. The Spanish goal was not only to create an alliance with the Caddo, but also to convert a group they felt were likely to do so.

Caddo greeting rituals were complex and filled with symbolism, which was possibly confusing to Spanish explorers and missionaries. Caddo customs set the terms for meetings with Europeans. At the initial meeting, each side would have their first glimpse at the other's priorities and faith traditions before they even knew that is what they were seeing. Sentinels would notify Caddo leadership that visitors had entered their lands, prompting the caddi to gather both men and women to accompany them in the welcoming. It was significant for the greeting party to include

¹³ Barr, 62.

¹⁴ Fray Isidro Félix de Espinosa, "Espinosa's Diary of the 1716 Entrada," *The Presidio and Militia on the Northern Frontier of New Spain: A Documentary History*, eds. Diana Hadley, Thomas H. Naylor, and Mardith K. Schuetz-Miller (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997).

women because “the presence of women was the only way to signal peaceful intentions”¹⁵ due to the Caddo’s assumption of aggression without them. Once the groups could see one another, they approached each other in military formations. For the Caddo, that meant three lines: the caddi in the center, followed by more leadership, and flanked by the remainder of the party. The Spaniards were led by their military leader carrying a banner bearing the images of Christ and the Virgin Mary, with missionaries and soldiers holding ranks around him. “The military captain then passed the standard to the head missionary, knelt before it in veneration, kissed the images, and embraced the missionary or kissed his hand or habit.”¹⁶ The imagery of the Virgin Mary and the deep respect shown for her by the military leadership would have

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proved meaningful for the Caddo given that the Spanish traveled without women. The Spanish did not choose the icon of the Virgin

because she was female, like the Caddo believed; they chose her image because she was religiously significant to them. Without the Mother of Christ on their banner, the Spaniards could have been perceived as hostile and not welcomed by the Caddo. Her image functioned as a stand-in for mothers, wives, and daughters that the Caddo would have expected to see in the Spanish party.

Misunderstandings born out of intentions of respect began at these preliminary meetings. After initial gift giving and further salutes, the guests were invited to the Caddo village to be greeted by hundreds of community members and take part in days long ceremonies of friendship. Female participation in the ceremonies and rituals performed once the Europeans arrived in their villages was just as important to the Caddo nation as in the initial meeting. Allowing the Spanish to enter the villages where the women and children resided was an additional indication of trust and peace. Aspects of the ceremonies that felt obvious in their significance to both parties actually created further confusion. For instance, one part of a ceremony in which the legs of the visitor were laid over the legs of two young women could have been perceived as a representation of the indigenous version of a sacred cross. That Catholic assumption was incorrect as the Caddo intended to represent

¹⁵ Barr, *Peace*, 1.

¹⁶ Barr, 31.

the four cardinal directions. Additionally, any Caddo imagery of the cross represented the sacred fire and “probably was intended to convey not only the sanctity of the event but also fertility and reproduction as a metaphor of reciprocity among allies.”¹⁷ The Caddo motivation for those ceremonies would have been positive ones of friendship. The Spaniards and the Caddo could have assumed all intentions were clear because the symbols were so significant to each of them in their own cultures. The Spanish would have been quick (and elated) to believe that any imagery associated with the cross of Christ would represent commonality and willingness, perhaps even eagerness, for the Caddo to come to know and understand Catholicism. These good intentions coupled with communication breakdowns became a pattern between the Caddo and their European visitors.

The tale of María de Jesús de Agreda provides a clear picture of how the best intentions at clear communication could still fail to make it past linguistic and cultural barriers. The first telling of the story of María de Jesús de Agreda was written by a Portuguese friar, Alonso de Benavides, in 1631, after seeking to convert Native Americans in New Mexico.¹⁸ His confidence in the legend came from conversations with the Native peoples where they explained their recollection of a lady in a blue cloak preaching to them and assisting with the baptisms of those who chose to convert. Benavides’ writing provided the Spanish missionaries with a contextual basis for how the legend of Agreda could assist the Spanish in their efforts.

Spanish missionaries were convinced that the legend of the bilocation of the Franciscan nun María de Jesús de Agreda and stories of a “Lady in Blue” from the Caddo were tales of the same woman. The missionaries assumed that a correlation between the two, along with questions and positive responses from the Caddo when presented with the legend, equated to belief in the story of Agreda and therefore an inclination to know more about and potentially convert to the Catholic faith. According to Catholic legend, “a Franciscan nun, Agreda, living in Spain, who had traveled in spirit to the New World hundreds of times

¹⁷ George Sabo, “Rituals of Encounter: Interpreting Native American Views of European Explorers,” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (1992): 54–68.

¹⁸ Antonio de Castro, *The Venerable Mother Maria de Jesus de Agreda Preaching to the Chichimecs of New Mexico*, 1730, engraving, John Carter Brown Library, Providence, Rhode Island.

to instruct Indians in Christianity” was the original Spanish missionary.¹⁹ Her perceived success buoyed the confidence of Spaniards in East Texas when Alonso de León and Friar Damián Manzanet arrived in 1689. When the missionaries sought evidence of Agreda’s contact with the Caddo, they were rewarded with tales passed down to leadership from previous generations of a “very beautiful woman, who used to come down from the heights, dressed in blue garments, and that they wished to be like.”²⁰ Friar Damián Manzanet took these stories to be definitive proof of María de Jesús de Agreda’s interaction with the Caddo.



Figure 2. Engraving of Maria de Jesus de Agreda by Antonio Castro, 1730. Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library

Despite the confirmation bias the Spanish missionaries were experiencing, Agreda was not the “Lady in Blue.” The Hasinai could have been referring to multiple creation myths when agreeing that they had been visited by this marvelous female figure. One such myth is that of a female goddess named Zacado. According to the Caddo, Zacado “appeared to their ancestors to teach them how to survive in the world and then disappeared once they learned how to hunt, fish, build homes, and dress.”²¹ The Caddo tale of Zacado explaining how to physically survive could have been conflated with Agreda preaching how to live morally through Christianity. The origin story of Ayo-Caddi-Aymay, the Supreme Being, who came into existence when there were only three women at the beginning of the world could have also been the Caddo’s reference to a powerful and important woman in the sky. In this story, the three original women were a mother and her two daughters. A demon attacked and killed one of the daughters, who happened to be pregnant. The baby survived, grew to adulthood rapidly and sought revenge for his mother’s slaying by killing the demon. The man and

¹⁹ Barr, *Peace*, 37.

²⁰ Barr, 37.

²¹ Barr, 37.

the two remaining women ascended to the sky, where he oversaw the world as the Supreme Being.²² Ayo-Caddi-Aymay's story continued to confirm the Caddo admiration for powerful women who dwelt in the heavens and had been on Earth at some point but did not draw a direct correlation to Agreda.

Additionally, Friar Francisco Casañas Jesus Maria shared what he called a superstition believed by the native peoples in his letter to the viceroy in August 1691. In that story, men made Heaven, but a woman gave them the shaping of the Earth and the heavens. The legend stated that "the woman is in Heaven and that she is the one who daily gives birth to the sun, the moon, the water when it rains, the frost, the snow, the corn, the thunder, and the lightning"²³ and that she knew the date of the death of leadership. When the Spanish were actively seeking confirmation of the faith's hero performing her sacred duty, it would be feasible for them to see her in any story told about a female that the Caddo were excited about.

Much of what allowed the Caddo and the Spanish to remain under friendly terms was, in fact, miscommunication. For many years, the two peoples were able to work together under this seemingly false dynamic due to the intentions of both parties being a mutually beneficial alliance and maintaining deferential communication. The breakdown of the relationship, and therefore a complete dissolution in interest related to Catholicism, was two-pronged. First, the Spanish parties continued to contain only men. Not only were there no women, but the men who were sent to the area were not all upstanding and of good moral character. In his letter to the viceroy, Casañas directly requested a change to the practice of sending only men, particularly disreputable ones, to continue good relations with the Caddo. He explained the Natives' aversion to Spanish men living near their wives without wives of their own and that the Caddo "want to be friends...under such conditions that no harm will be done the Indians by Spaniards if they do come without their wives but, if the Spaniards bring their wives, the Indians will be satisfied."²⁴ Casañas rightfully feared that all the work the missionaries had done to

²² Barr, 29–30.

²³ Fray Francisco Casañas Jesus Maria, In *Descriptions of the Tejas of Asinai Indians 1691–1722 II*, trans. Mattie Austin Hatcher, *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 30, no. 4, (1927): 296–97.

²⁴ Jesus Maria, In *Descriptions of the Tejas of Asinai Indians 1691-1722 II*, 288–89.

that point would be ruined if the Spanish did not take this request from the caddi seriously. Second, the Spanish made the error of showing their judgment of assumed female promiscuity within the Caddo based on misinterpretations of marriage and infidelity in the Native community, appearance, and perceived lewdness.²⁵ Instead of expressing their honor through dressing as modestly and covered as possible, as European women did, the Caddo women proudly displayed their position and life stage on their bodies via painted decoration. Decoration increased in complexity and beauty as the women progressed through life, signifying their marital and maternal status as well as participation in the economic system of the community. The paint was on the face, shoulders, chest, and abdomen of the female Caddo, with a concentration on the breasts. Lack of understanding of the life stages indicated or the public viewing of breasts caused the Spanish to interpret that the amplified decoration indicated excessive sexual experience. Caddo women's comfort with casual affection while painted rather than clothed was also disquieting for the Spanish.²⁶ These differences in public behavior standards were simply too large a leap for some Europeans.

Spanish refusal to bring women into their settlements to make family-based communities, lack of respect for women's essential roles in Caddo diplomacy, and devolution into sexual violence when attempting to assert authority set them on a path toward diplomatic and evangelical failure. The Caddo had built tenuous trust in the Spanish around the presentation of honor and reverence of images of the Virgin Mary. Those behaviors were the indicators to the Caddo that the Spaniards had intentions of peace and friendship. The breaches in that trust made proselytization nearly impossible. To reform their reputation and reestablish significant relationships when they returned in the later portion of the eighteenth century, the Spanish used new tactics and led with respect for the true leaders of Texas, the Indigenous people. ■

²⁵ Barr, *Peace*, 61.

²⁶ Barr, 63–64.

Student Biography

Heather Sellers is a recent graduate of Sam Houston State University with a Bachelor of Arts in History. She is an admirer of all aspects of Texas and has a keen interest in Judeo-Christian practices. When Heather was assigned to examine the Native South in the eighteenth century, she was naturally intrigued by the relationship between the Caddo nation of East Texas and Spanish missionaries. Under the advisement of Dr. Joshua Haynes, an assistant professor in the Department of History, Heather conducted extensive research on the delicate, transitory alliance between the two nations. She will be teaching Texas History at a middle school in Cypress, Texas in the fall of 2024. She hopes to inspire her students to be thoughtful, lifelong learners and possibly, history enthusiasts.