Diffusion or Independent Development?
The Treatment of War Captives by the Haudenosaunee, Aztecs and Tupinambá
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The societies of the Haudenosaunee, Aztecs, and Tupinambá share many distinct traits in terms of their treatment of war captives. These traits include the ownership and potential incorporation of the captive into the group, the abuse and torture of war prisoners, ceremonial sacrifice, and cannibalism. The reasons for these similar characteristics have been debated by historians and anthropologists. Some argue that diffusion, typically from Mesoamerica, is primarily responsible, others argue that it can be attributed to independent inventions at specific points in each society's development. Though no definite explanation for these similar behaviours exists, a clear portrait can emerge when outlining the many shared characteristics of these civilizations, which can then be analysed within the framework of the diffusion or independent development arguments.

A definition of diffusion and independent development—and all of their inherent implications—must be ascertained before entering into the debate behind the origins of the war captive complex in Haudenosaunee, Aztec and Tupinambá societies. According to Robert L. Rands and Carroll L. Riley in "Diffusion and Discontinuous Distribution," diffusion may be the simplest of the explanations for common culture traits and societal structures. The problems inherent in this theory are mechanisms of time, space, and means of transporting materials or ideas. The nature of the traits and attitudes of the donor and recipient groups also factor into the successful transmission of cultural elements. On the other hand, independent invention is more complicated as it is typically attributed to the parallel development of similar characteristics in geographically separated areas, or convergence of the identity of traits with diverse origins.[1] Rands and Riley describe the characteristics and traits of a society as its complex nucleus. They state that complex nuclei may be present for several reasons: derivation from a common ancestral culture, direct diffusion, or independent invention.[2] If for any of these reasons the same complex nucleus is shared in geographically separated parts of the world - even if little or no subsequent intercourse takes place between these areas – then it is probable that over a course of

[1] Robert L. Rands and Carroll L. Riley, "Diffusion and Discontinuous Distribution," *American Anthropologist* 60, no. 2 (April 1958): 274.
[2] *Ibid.*, 276.

time a number of elaborations will also be shared. The result is the formation of a complex of traits in each area, some of which closely parallel each other.[3] Therefore, the concept of complex nuclei and its subsequent elaboration is not antithetical to diffusion, and therein lies the difficulty in proving that either diffusion or independent development are responsible for the common traits shared between distinct culture groups in separate geographic areas.

The likelihood of the independent development of similar cultural traits depends on the complex demand of the compared societies: their economic, socio-political, and environmental similarities.[4] Rands and Riley compare it to the creation of the blowgun, which was present in Central and South America, as well as Southeast Asia. They state that it represents an excellent case of complex demand as its invention depended on the availability of resources, environmental demands, and its overall practicality in both regions.[5] Though material elaborations are simpler than cultural elaborations, presenting the similarities between Haudenosaunee, Aztec, and Tupinambá cultures can create a clear picture of the complex demands of each society. The Haudenosaunee and Tupinambá shared many of these similarities mentioned above. Both were societies of semi-sedentary hunter-gatherers who practised slash-and-burn agriculture, and frequently relocated their villages.[6] Both cultures were egalitarian and organized by tribe, and decisions in Haudenosaunee society were made by a peace and war chief, in addition to a village council. This was similar to Tupinambá society, where decisions were made by a council of male elders.[7] Both societies also believed in the healing powers of the shaman, who could be either a man or woman. Work was also divided along gender lines: men felled trees, hunted and fished, while women planted and harvested crops. The settlements of both cultures were surrounded by thick forest, and they even shared some of the same crops, such as maize, squash and beans, which may lend credence to Bruce Trigger's assertion that

[3] *Ibid.*, 275–6.
[4] *Ibid.*, 275.
[5] *Ibid.*, 280.
[6] Bruce Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers: Canada's "Heroic Age Reconsidered"* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985), 83-91; Cheryl English Martin and Mark Wasserman. *Latin America and its People*, 2nd ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2008), 60; John Charles Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire: A Concise History of Latin America*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 27.
[7] Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*, 93; Martin and Wasserman, 60; Chasteen, 27.

these crops were diffused from Mesoamerica, along with human sacrifice.[8] The Haudenosaunee and Tupinambá peoples shared many similar aspects in their treatment of war captives as well.

The Aztecs, on the other hand, were a more complex society, which may explain the more elaborate and variety of sacrifices they performed. Unlike the Haudenosaunee and Tupinambá, they were a sedentary society, with permanent settlements and sustainable forms of agriculture. This allowed for the growth of large cities, and greater labour specialization, resulting in the stratification of their society.[9] The Aztecs had greater political centralization and were ruled by a hereditary leader. There was also a developed nobility class which shared many privileges and distinctions over the peasantry. A class of artisans existed, but were included in the commoner class. Additionally, the Aztecs developed a market economy, and merchants were an important social group with special privileges.[10] Like the Haudenosaunee and Tupinambá, work duties were divided along gender lines, with men working the fields, serving as soldiers and performing compulsory labour for their rulers. Women handled the domestic chores, marketed surplus produce, and presided over the religious rituals in the home.[11] Aztec religion was also complex. Each month had ceremonies that were closely related to the agricultural cycle.[12] Hundred of priests presided over ceremonies held in the temples of Tenochtitlan. Moreover, these priests were an important part of the ruling class.[13] The availability of full-time specialists and priests may have contributed to more complex elaboration than the less-developed societies of the Haudenosaunee and Tupinambá. However, due to the complexity of Aztec society and their practises of human sacrifice, only the ceremonial cycle of Tlacaxipehualiztli will be explored in this essay, as it presents a comparable situation to that of the entire war captive complex of the other two groups.

Why did these groups practice warfare in the first place, and what purpose did war captives serve? The Tupinambá were an aggressive people who were engaged in constant warfare with other tribes. Men had to distinguish themselves in battle before marrying, and

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[8] Trigger, *Natives and* Newcomers, 93.
[9] Chasteen, 27.
[10] Martin and Wasserman, 42.
[11] *Ibid*., 41–2.
[12] Sahagún, Bernardino de, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain, Book II: The Ceremonies*, trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research, 1950); Martin and Wasserman, 40.
[13] Martin and Wasserman, 41.

soldiers earned prestige through the capture and killing of prisoners. Though captives could be released and incorporated into tribal life through marriage, they were also mistreated and humiliated by the village women before being ceremonially sacrificed and eaten. This was preceded by up to three days of drinking, singing and dancing, and was an important social aspect of Tupinambá life.[14]

The Haudenosaunee waged war with neighbouring tribes to exact retribution, in addition to gaining economic and tribal advantages.[15] Like the Tupinambá, it has also been suggested that the Haudenosaunee went to war to enhance collective male prestige, through the capture and sacrifice of prisoners.[16] Men, women, and children were taken captive, with women and children typically being spared. Men were either accepted into the tribe, or tortured, ceremonially executed, and eaten, similar to the Tupinambá. Upon capture, there was always a period of initial abuse and humiliation, carried out by village women who had lost husbands in the preceding campaign. However, individuals that survived this initial period and were adopted by local families became fully integrated members of the tribe, usually marrying and raising families of their own.[17]

The Aztecs conducted intensive warfare for territorial and economic gain, and for the purpose of obtaining prisoners for slavery and sacrifice. These captives were sacrificed to various gods in many ways, according to the ceremonial month of the Aztec calendar. For the month of Tlacaxipeualiztli, two successive days of ceremony were held. On the first day, captive warriors were abused before being sacrificed by having their hearts torn out at the top of a temple, before having their remains eaten. On the second day, these captives engaged in ritual combat, armed but outnumbered by four other warriors, who would dispatch them with sword blows.[18] Though there are differences in the treatment of war captives between the three groups observed, a close examination of their similar traits can further elucidate the arguments for diffusion or independent invention.

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[14] Rands and Riley, 284; Martin and Wasserman, 60; Alida C. Metcalf, *Go-betweens and the Colonization of Brazil: 1500-1600* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005), 72.

[15] Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*, 260–261.

[16] *Ibid.*, 99.

[17] Pierre François Xavier de Charlevoix, *Journal of a Voyage to North-America Undertaken by Order of the French King*, vol. 1 (London, England: R. & J. Dodsley, 1761), 369-71; Trigger, 97; Rands and Riley, 284.

[18] Rands and Riley, 284; Sahagún, 3–4.

Individual ownership of the captive occurred in all three cultures. In Aztec society, the Florentine Codex describes how the captor "owned" the captive, and accompanied their prisoner throughout the entire ceremonial sacrifice. The taking of a prisoner merited honour, and the captors were adorned with gifts for their capture. After the captive's death, the master would receive a gourd vessel, filled with the blood of the victim, which was his to keep.[19] In Tupinambá and Haudenosaunee societies, individual ownership was important as warriors who had captured and sacrificed captives acquired great prestige and influence in their community.[20] As it was difficult to seize an enemy without the assistance of several persons, there was an established rule in Tupinambá warfare in which the defeated opponent belonged to the first man who touched him.[21] The Aztecs kept records of the prisoners captured in a conflict, and disputes between captors were inquired into and adjusted. If neither party could sufficiently prove their ownership, the captive was given to the priests to be sacrificed.[22] Similarly, the Haudenosaunee had a formalized procedure, whereas, if several warriors disputed ownership over a captive, the captive could choose their owner.[23] All societies could have been responding to the difficulties of warfare, with large numbers of men fighting in close quarters, which must have caused frequent confusion as to who made the capture. Additionally, the personal prestige gained through the capture of enemy warriors must have created the need for a formalized method of prisoner ownership. This could indicate that these groups were responding the complex demands of their society.

Additionally, in all cultures the prisoner could be given away or sold by his captor. In Aztec society, the captive could be sold or kept as a slave if they displayed skill in music, weaving, embroidery or other valued domestic occupations.[24] The Tupinambá and Haudenosaunee normally gave their captives away, either to other warriors, or to widows that

[19] Sahagún, 3; 49–52.

[20] Bruce G. Trigger, *The Huron: Farmers of the North*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969). 52; Alfred Métraux, "The Tupinamba." In *Handbook of South American Indians*, vol. 3 (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1946), 112.

[21] Métraux, 120.

[22] Hubert Howe Bancroft. *Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft*, vol.2 (San Francisco: A.L. Bancroft, 1882–1890), 428.

[23] Trigger, *The Huron: Farmers of the North*, 58.

[24] Bancroft, 217–8.

lost husbands in previous campaigns. Hans Staden, a German mercenary who was captured in 1554 by two Tupinambá brothers in the colony of Sao Vicente and wrote an account of his ordeal. He claims that after being captured and taken to their village, he was presented in friendship to the brother of their captor's father.[25] Captives in both societies, upon being abused by the members of the village in a ritualistic fashion, were then divided amongst the populace of that village, beginning with women who had lost husbands in the war.[26] From this point, there was a chance the captive could be incorporated into the tribe through marriage, and treated like a Tupinambá or Haudenosaunee in full standing, thus effectively replacing a lost member of their society.[27] However, in Tupinambá society, the incorporated captive could be killed at any time if they did not meet the expectations of their society, in terms of hunting, fishing and other valuable tribal activities.[28]

Though the ownership of captives was present in all three cultures, there is no conclusive evidence whether diffusion or independent invention was responsible for these patterns of behaviour. Trigger has hypothesized that the Haudenosaunee spared many captives as they possessed skills that were valued in a society that had suffered heavy losses as a result of epidemics. He has suggested that war was waged solely to replenish their population after these heavy losses.[29] Furthermore, because the Haudenosaunee and Tupinambá were constantly engaged in warfare with surrounding enemies, the incorporation of captives into their tribal organization through marriage would alleviate losses incurred in prior campaigns. Thus, the replacing of lost family members would have economic and emotional advantages.[30] The Aztecs had no need to incorporate captives into their society because they had a steady supply of workers from their surrounding tributaries. Furthermore, they placed an even greater importance on human sacrifice, thus negating the need to replace warriors lost in battle. The similarities and differences between these three groups demonstrates that they may have been responding to the

[25] Hans Staden, *True History of His Captivity, 1557: Hans Staden*, trans. Malcolm Letts (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2005), 93.

[26] Jean de Léry, *History of a voyage to the land of Brazil, otherwise called America*, trans. Janet Whatley (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1990), 122. Charlevoix, 371.

[27] Nathaniel Knowles, "The Torture of Captives by the Indians of Eastern North America," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 82, no. 2 (March, 1940): 211; Charlevoix, 372.

[28] Léry, 122.

[29] Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*, 274; 260.

[30] Rands and Riley, 287.

complex demands of their societies, which would lend credibility to the idea of independent invention being responsible for the ownership of captives, and the potential incorporation into their captor's society.

The abuse and torture of war captives was also a feature common to all three cultures. In Aztec society, captives would have hair torn from the crown of their head before the temple sacrifice. During this sacrifice, they were dragged by the hair up the length of the pyramid to the sacrificial stone. Additionally, those awaiting the gladiatorial sacrifice had their hair ripped out, were stripped naked, and made to wait until the next morning's festivities. During this ceremony, captives were tied by a rope to a round stone and assailed by a number of warriors armed with shields and obsidian blades. However, these captives were given a sporting chance by being armed with an inferior war club and four pine cudgels, which must have inflicted humiliation as the captive was outnumbered, constrained and doomed to die during this battle.[31] Captives who became too exhausted from this battle were then sacrificed in the same manner as those dragged up the pyramid temple.

In Tupinambá and Haudenosaunee societies, this cruelty took an entirely different shape, though the Haudenosaunee also dragged their captives by the hair and stripped them naked.[32] Moreover, both groups inflicted humiliation on the prisoner as well. The brutal treatment of captives also included the women and children of the village, who physically and verbally abused their victims. Staden describes his initial treatment upon being captured and brought into a Tupinambá village: he claims the men of the village left him with the women, who physically beat and mocked him continuously. They scraped off his eyebrows and cut off his beard, and Staden describes having his legs bound and being forced to hop through the huts of the village. He states that he was told by his master that this was the customary treatment of enemy prisoners.[33] Jean de Léry substantiates Staden's account when he describes the Tupinambá ripping out the beards of Portuguese prisoners, but states this was a specialized form of

[31] Sahagún, 47-52.

[32] Peter Espirit Radisson, *Voyages of Peter Espirit Radisson: Being an Account of his Travels and Expeditions Among the North American Indians, from 1652 to 1684* (New York, Burt Franklin, 1967), 29; Reuben Gold Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents,* vol. 34 (Cleveland, OH: Burrows Brothers, 1901), 29.

[33] Staden, 100, 92-4.

humiliation and abuse directed at the Portuguese, who were their hated enemies.[34] Like the Aztecs, the Tupinambá also gave a sporting chance to their captives. The day before their execution, prisoners were given a chance to escape, but were immediately pursued and overtaken. Furthermore, on the day of execution, the condemned was given an inferior club to defend themselves with, but would always be dispatched and killed by their better-armed executioner.[35]

This abuse and humiliation was also present upon the homecoming of the Haudenosaunee war party and their captives. The torture the captives received varied, but typically involved the burning of the victim, the removal of their fingernails, mutilation, and physical assault. However, the Haudenosaunee always ensured that a fatal blow was never struck until they were ready to kill the victim.[36] Upon being brought to the Haudenosaunee village, prisoners not already condemned to die were lined up in front of the Haudenosaunee women who had lost husbands in the war. The prisoners were then beaten furiously by these women. Remaining captives were brought from hut to hut, where they were tortured and insulted by both young and old, while the captors did not interfere.[37] Sometimes the captives were made to run naked between a line of women and children who would whip their bare backs, or strike them with stones until either exhaustion overcame the prisoners, or they were spared by their tormentors. This is similar to the Aztecs and Tupinambá giving a sporting chance to their captured prisoners, albeit with an actual chance of survival as those who made it safely to their potential adopter's house were spared.[38] Furthermore, the Haudenosaunee employed the use of platform torture, which appears to be based upon human sacrifices to the Sun or War God, and shared certain resemblances with Aztec sacrifice as well.[39]

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[34] Léry, 131.

[35] Métraux, 122-4.

[36] Reuben Gold Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, vol. 31 (Cleveland, OH: Burrows Brothers, 1901), 29; Thwaites, 29-33; Radisson, 141; Charlevoix, 370-1.

[37] Charlevoix, 369-71.

[38] Henry Lewis Morgan, *League of the Ho-de-no sau-nee: or Haudenosaunee* (New Haven : Reprint by Human Relations Area Files, 1954), 333-4; Knowles, 212.

[39] Knowles, 219.

It has been argued that the comparable qualities of Tupinambá and Haudenosaunee prisoner abuse were present because individual revenge was a motivating factor in warfare.[40] This cruelty gave the non-combatants of the victorious group, including women and children, a chance to participate in the emotional excitement of hostilities in perfect safety to themselves. Also, it provides an opportunity for the release of tensions and aggressions upon an enemy.[41] In this case, independent invention may be responsible for abuse of captives by the Haudenosaunee and Tupinambá, as both had similar levels of complex demand, due to constant warfare and the need for revenge. On the other hand, A.C. Parker has suggested that Haudenosaunee ancestry may originate in the southern United States, noting that their crops and material culture may have also diffused from this region. Moreover, Trigger argues that the torture of prisoners and the distinction between peace and war-time chiefs may have diffused from this region as well.[42]

The final similarity which will be discussed in this paper is that of ceremonial human sacrifice and cannibalism, which was practised by all three groups. As stated earlier, the Aztecs practised various methods of human sacrifice, but only the ceremonial cycle of Tlacaxipehualiztli will be discussed, as it shares many characteristics with the forms that the Haudenosaunee and Tupinambá practised. The Aztecs would drag their captives up the steps of the pyramid temple, stretch them out on a sacrificial stone, and cut their hearts out, raising it in dedication to the sun. The bodies were then rolled back down the steps of the temple, where old men called *quaquacuilti* would remove the bodies and cut it into portions to be eaten by the captor and their blood relatives.[43] The basic concept behind these practises was the common religious conviction that only through the sacrifice of human blood could the cosmic order be maintained.[44]

The Tupinambá also ate their victim's remains, though instead of tearing out the heart, they would kill the victim by beating in their head with a club.[45] Like the Aztecs, the corpses

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[40] Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*, 97

[41] Rands and Riley, 287.

[42] Arthur C. Parker, "The Origin of the Haudenosaunee as Suggested by Their Archaeology," *American Anthropologist*, 18, no. 4 (October – December, 1916); Trigger, 63.

[43] Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Bernal Diaz chronicles: The true story of the conquest of Mexico*, trans. Albert Idell (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1956), 82, 368-9; Sahagún, 48-9.

[44] Trigger, *The Huron: Farmers of the North*, 64; Martin and Wasserman, 41.

[45] Staden, 119-20.

would be cut up, but the remains would be distributed to the village to consume.[46] The long set of cannibalistic rites began immediately after the capture of a prisoner. Warfare and cannibalism were closely connected and revolved around religious and social values of high importance.[47] The Haudenosaunee shared many characteristics with the sacrifice and cannibalism practised by both groups, with death sometimes being inflicted by bludgeoning of the head.[48] More often, significance was placed on the heart, which could be torn from the living victim's chest, roasted and eaten.[49] Like all three groups, the Haudenosaunee would eat the remains of their victims.[50] According to Nathaniel Knowles, cannibalism invariably accompanied torture amongst all Haudenosaunee people.[51] Furthermore, like both groups, warfare was inspired by religious ideals, and like the Aztecs, prisoner sacrifice was the means of reinforcing and ensuring the continuation of the natural world.[52]

The ritual sacrifice and cannibalism of war prisoners is perhaps the most debated aspect of diffusion versus independent invention. Certain key elements of the Haudenosaunee treatment of prisoners, including the removal of the heart, the killing of the victim on an elevated platform and in view of the sun, and finally the cooking and eating of all or parts of the body, connect this north Haudenosaunee ritual with ones practised in the south-eastern United States and in Mexico by the Aztecs. "[It]... appear[s] that the fundamental ideas of this ceremony diffused northward from Mesoamerica... and were used by various groups which developed their own version of it."[53] On the other hand, it has been stated that these similarities may have developed indigenously into the sacrifice of captives. Whether this ritual diffused from Mexico or was of local independent growth cannot be proven until more corroborative evidence is produced. At present, the evidence seems to favour independent invention.[54] Rand and Riley also point to the presence of particular traits between the Tupinambá and Haudenosaunee, such as cannibalism

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[46] *Ibid.*, 120.
[47] Métraux, 119-22.
[48] Knowles, 189.
[49] *Ibid.*; Thwaites, 33.
[50] Emma Helen Blair, *The Indian Tribes of the Upper Mississippi Valley and Region of the Great Lakes,* vol. 1 (Cleveland, OH: A.H. Clark Co., 1911), 182; Reuben Gold Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents,* vol. 39 (Cleveland, OH: Burrows Brothers, 1901), 81; Thwaites, vol. 34, 33; Radisson, 141.
[51] Knowles, 189.
[52] Trigger, *The Huron: Farmers of the North*, 52.
[53] Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers*, 97.
[54] Knowles, 218.

and the incorporation of prisoners which are absent in the south-eastern United States, arguing that this may also point to parallel development.[55]

The debate between diffusion and parallel development as being responsible for the Aztec, Tupinambá, and Haudenosaunee treatment of war captives is difficult to prove as there is no substantial evidence to support either position. While ownership of captives was prevalent in each culture, only the Tupinambá and Haudenosaunee incorporated some of the captives into their society through marriage. The reason for this key difference could be that both groups were at similar levels in terms of the complex demands of their societies, thus making parallel development possible. The abuse of prisoners was widespread in all three societies, though torture was embedded in the treatment of war captives in Tupinambá and Haudenosaunee warfare. Knowles argues that torture in Haudenosaunee culture may have been a recent elaboration, but this could also be susceptible to diffusion. If a member of a given tribe was tortured or executed by an enemy group, it might be expected that a captive of that group would be treated in the same manner.[56] However, both the Tupinambá and Haudenosaunee were in constant warfare with neighbouring tribes to avenge injuries, which may explain the need to exact revenge through brutal forms of torture, and incorporate others to replace fallen warriors and workers. The Aztecs, on the other hand, did not need to replace these members of society as they had a constant pool of tributary manpower. Therefore, all groups may have been responding to the different complex demands of their cultures.

Yet, while the need for revenge and personal prestige appear to be indigenous elements of warfare in Tupinambá and Haudenosaunee societies, the sacrificial cult contained numerous elements that may have been derived from the south-eastern United States, and ultimately Mesoamerican, at least for the Haudenosaunee.[57] Trigger argues that while there are significant differences between the sacrificial cult as it was practised in the south-eastern United States and among the northern Haudenosaunees, these differences merely indicate that it did not diffuse in its entirety from one region to another. Instead, certain key ideas seem to have spread north and

[55] Rands and Riley, 292.
[56] Knowles, 6, 66; Rands and Riley, 293.
[57] Trigger, *The Huron: Farmers of the North*, 64.

were used by the Haudenosaunees to develop a sacrificial complex of their own.[58] Moreover, these parallels with sacrifice in Mesoamerica may indicate a distant common origin.[59] Nevertheless, it cannot be substantially established whether diffusion, independent invention, or both were responsible for the similarities of the treatment of war captives by the Aztecs, Tupinambá and Haudenosaunee. Until more corroborative historical or anthropological evidence is unearthed, the origins of this complex might remain one of the great mysteries of indigenous societies in the Americas.

[58] *Ibid*.
[59] Knowles, 1.

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