**Had syncretism not occurred in the Americas, how might modern culture be different?**

Synecretism is the process by which cultures are merged, generally between traditional culture and traits of an introduced culture. This process was especially pronounced in the Americas with the introduction of colonial culture with the colonization of both North and South America. Two major examples of how the cultural syncretism took place are in the Spanish conquest of the Incan empire and the British colonization of New England. If this cultural change had not occurred with relatively little resistance, modern culture might be significantly different with significantly more indigenous traits having been incorporated into the European cultural traditions and beliefs.

The Mayan civilization derived from a massive empire that covered Mesoamerica from modern-day Mexico in the north all the way into El Salvador. While the Mayan culture has remained prominent in isolated pockets in some areas Mexico and Guatemala, in general the culture was extremely integrated into the colonial culture of the Spaniards rather than being lost through a process of acculturation. Spanish legislative policies towards the indigenous Mayans were lenient and allowed them to keep their language and customs for the most part. However, the economic system employed in the Americas, the encomienda estate system, relocated the indigenous people to allow them to work on the Spanish estates, where they were taught English as the primary language, and to convert to natives to Christianity (Shuman, 1999). Since the language was so widespread, however, many indigenous words have been incorporated into Latin American Spanish. The matter of religion was one of the few areas where the Spanish actually forbade native practices, forcing Christianity on the Mayans.. However, rather than replacing the indigenous beliefs, these gods were merged together into the personhood of the Catholic Saints, so that the overt religious practice appeared to the Spanish as colonial, while still retaining the traditional meaning for the Mayan peoples (O’Neil, 2009). This is a particularly good example of syncretism exemplifies how the Spanish colonial policy peacefully merged Mayan culture and languages into European colonial traditions, religion, and languages.

On the other hand, the impact of colonization on North American Native American tribes was much more pronounced than the syncretism in South America, with many British colonial policies essentially obliterating some aspects of Native American culture. In what is now the United States, the British established colonial policies whose sole goal was essentially to “integrate” the indigenous peoples into the British culture, establishing schools to teach their children English, which many historians believe was a form of oppression, forcing assimilation that disenfranchised the native peoples and essentially decimated Native American culture (Tsai & Alanis, 2004). This effort was so extreme that in some areas, children were forced to attend residential schools, often against the will of their parents, to strip them of their language and culture and assimilate them into the “mainstream” American society (Popick, 2006). More, in an effort to claim more land to use for colonial purposes and profit, a large amount of land was seized from the indigenous peoples. In a continuation of this policy, most Native Americans were put on reserves, or reservations, removing their ability to be self-sufficient and destroying the prior way of life of nomadic hunters of game like Buffalo (Popick, 2006; Tsai & Alanis, 2004). Through federal legislation demanding land cessation from the tribes in North America, 150 million acres, or almost 8% of the total land area of the United States (Tsai & Alanis, 2004). As a result of the isolating of the indigenous people in reservations and through restricting trade, there has been very little influence on European cultural beliefs and traditions by the conquered people in what is now the United States. However, the impact of European culture on the Native American way of life is great, with a high degree of assimilation of these groups into “mainstream” culture and a widespread loss of language and traditions. This is in contrast to the policies of Spanish conquest, where there was a much greater level of merging of cultures, or syncretism, than was seen in the British colonies with those indigenous peoples.

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