

Historian explains how 'conquered' indigenous Brazilians shaped their own histories

April 15 2014, by Pat Donovan

Hal Langfur, PhD, associate professor of history at the University at Buffalo, has published for more than a decade on indigenous Brazilian groups faced with colonization and armed subjugation by the Portuguese, as well as on the mythologies that grew up around their cultures.

His latest book, "Native Brazil: Beyond the Convert and the Cannibal, 1500-1900" (University of New Mexico Press, 2014), is an important contribution to literature aimed at the ways Brazil's native peoples shaped their own histories in the face of religious, cultural and geographical domination.

Here, Langfur moves beyond early European accounts of their astonishment at the natives' nakedness and conduct—particularly cannibalistic rituals—and looks skeptically at the process of converting them to "clothed, docile Christian vassals."

"The book contributes to the unfinished task of dispelling the stereotypes fostered by polarized views of the native peoples that have impeded our ability to make sense of Brazil's rich indigenous past," he says.

Langfur focuses on the two practices of conversion and cannibalism to demonstrate how both were used by the Portuguese to legitimate their treatment of the 2,000 or so indigenous tribes, some with histories that

extended back 10,000 years, and that comprised Brazil's population at the time the region was invaded and colonized by the Europeans.

"Conversion provided the ultimate confirmation for colonists that their mission was just and that guileless native peoples might willingly submit to conquest," Langfur says.

"Alternatively, the Portuguese invoked cannibalism to emphasize the natives' savagery, legitimate their slaughter and justify their enslavement.

"To this day," Langfur says, "the original convert/cannibal contradiction has obscured the complexity of indigenous cultures and social conduct, and the choices and ambiguities inherent in diverse responses to colonialism.

"In order to understand the many peoples who altered the history of an enormous swath of the Americas," he says, "we need to move beyond our own limitations."

This book not only offers the opportunity to begin that process—by recognizing and correcting Eurocentric presumptions about Brazil—but explains why they should be corrected. In doing so, Langfur tells us much about the process of colonization itself, an understanding that can be applied to the experience of many [native peoples](#).

Langfur is the author of "The Forbidden Lands: Colonial Identity, Frontier Violence, and the Persistence of Brazil's Eastern Indians, 1750-1830" (Stanford University Press, 2006), which concerns a pivotal but unexamined surge in frontier violence that engulfed the eastern forests of 18th-century Brazil's most populous region, Minas Gerais, now Brazil's second most populous state.

His articles on this and related topics have appeared in many peer-related journals. He currently is working on a book titled "Adrift on an Inland Sea: The Projection of Portuguese Power in the Brazilian Wilderness."

Provided by University at Buffalo

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