

**Ghosts from the Past in Contemporary Identity Politics:
Moctezuma II and Christopher Columbus**

**Fantasmas del Pasado en la Política de Identidad Contemporánea:
Moctezuma II y Cristóbal Colón**

Otto F von Feigenblatt

Real Academia de Doctores de España

vonFeigenblatt@hotmail.com

Fecha de recepción: 13 de noviembre de 2020

Fecha de aceptación: 10 de diciembre de 2020

Publicado: 31 de diciembre de 2020

Abstract

The 21st century has seen a sharp increase in identity politics. Both European countries and the Americas have faced movements to re-examine their pasts. In the case of Spain, the socialist government of Pedro Sanchez passed legislation to reinterpret the post civil war period. In the case of Mexico, the administration of Lopez Obrador has re-opened old wounds by requesting a formal apology from the King of Spain and from the Pope for the conquest of Mexico. The present exploratory essay deals with an understudied aspect of this ideological debate over cultural identity, the role of the descendants of important historical figures in contemporary identity politics. There is a certain element of an re-enactment of history in the words and deeds of the descendants of Moctezuma II and of Christopher Columbus which at times resembles Aztec rituals involving temporary possession of their persons by the spirit of their ancestors.

Keywords: cultural identity, Moctezuma II, Christopher Columbus, conflict.

Resumen

El siglo XXI ha visto un gran aumento en la política de identidad. Europa y las Américas han enfrentado a movimientos revisionistas de sus historias. En el caso de España, el gobierno socialista de Pedro Sánchez ha impulsado legislación para reinterpretar el periodo de la post-guerra. En el caso de México, la administración de López Obrador ha reabierto viejas heridas al solicitar disculpas formales al Rey de España y al Papa por la conquista de México. Este ensayo exploratorio trata sobre un aspecto poco estudiado de este debate ideológico sobre la identidad cultural, el rol de los descendientes de figuras históricas en la política de identidad contemporánea. Hay un cierto elemento de actuación de la historia en las palabras y acciones de los descendientes de Moctezuma II y de Cristóbal Colón los cuales en muchos casos se asemejan a los ritos Aztecas de antaño en los que llevaba a cabo la posesión momentánea de sus personas por el espíritu de sus ancestros.

Palabras Clave: identidad cultural, Moctezuma II, Cristóbal Colón, conflicto

Introduction

The end of the Cold War led to resurgence in ethnic conflict and to an upsurge in identity politics (Friedman, 2000, 2011; Huntington, 2003). While many of those conflicts reflected frozen disputes dating back hundreds of years, many of the contemporary disputes are part of a worrying trend of populism in politics and the deployment of history to serve narrow interests (Muhametzyanov, Usmanova, & Somkina, 2019; Murphy, 2009). Regrettably this populist history has affected both the right and the left. Contemporary struggles over resources and votes are fought by invoking events that took place over five hundred years ago. In order to wage these contemporary battles

over identity the past is appropriated through the attempted control over archeological artifacts and other symbols (Muhametzyanov et al., 2019; Pruitt & Kim, 2004; Rerksirisuk, 2009).

The Mesoamerican importance of blood and lineage is evidenced by the contemporary celebration of the Day of the Dead in Mexico and by the many Aztec rituals involving ancestors (Castillo, 2008; Clendinnen, 2014; Folan, Bolles, & Ek, 2016). As a result of this there is an interest for both anthropological and political reasons to identify the descendants of the Aztecs, Zapotecs, and other indigenous groups in Mesoamerica (Cohen, 1996; Fernandez-Armesto, 2003; Hillel, 2009). This is particularly important because of continuing structural inequality in Mexico and the challenge of claiming authority to speak for the Mexican “nation”. There is also the obvious challenge of defining the “nation” (Iwabuchi, 2008). Is it based on “blood”, “culture”, or something else?

Contemporary Spain is undergoing a similar period of national reckoning. In the case of Spain the socialist government is reviewing post Civil War period with several laws redefining the official history of the years leading to the democratic transition of 1975. Even though the post Civil War period of Spanish history does not directly deal with issues of the discovery of America and the conquest, the post Civil War government fostered a national narrative of pride in the discovery of America and in the imperial period (Spain, 2013). Thus, many aspects of this history are being revisited as an indirect result of this. Examples of this include the coat of arms of Spain during the rule of the Caudillo Francisco Franco which adopted the Eagle of San Juan which was the symbol of the Catholic Monarchs, Isabella and Ferdinand ("Spanish Coat of Arms," 2014).

As part of this 21st century debate over the past and its impact on the present, both sides of the political spectrum have mobilized symbols ranging from archeological sites, religious sites, and the actual descendants of some of the main players in the Great Encounter/Conquest. The

present paper focuses on the roles played by the direct descendants of Moctezuma II and of Christopher Columbus. Other ancillary roles are explored such as the one played by the Pope, the King of Spain, the President of Mexico, academics on both sides of the Ocean, and the common people.

Who holds the title of Admiral of the Ocean Sea?

One of the most unique and symbolic titles of nobility still in current use is the title bestowed on Christopher Columbus by the Catholic Kings, namely the title of Admiral of the Ocean Sea (Salcedo, 2008). This title is unique in that it was made hereditary and that it does not follow the usual nomenclature of Spanish titles of nobility. The current holder of this title is His Most Excellent Lordship Cristóbal Colón de Carvajal y Gorosábel, 18th Duke of Veragua, 17th Duke of la Vega, 19th Marquess of Aguilafuente, 16th Marquess of Jamaica, 20th Admiral of the Ocean Sea, GE, OIC, most commonly known in Spain as His Excellency the Duke of Veragua (Salcedo, 2008). He is the direct descendent of Christopher Columbus and he holds some of the most important historical titles of nobility of Spain. It should be noted that Spain is a constitutional monarchy and that titles of nobility are officially recognized and protected by law ("Almuerzo de Verano con los Titulos del Reino," 2013; *Elenco de Ordenes de Caballeria e Instituciones Afines*, 2005).

The current Duke of Veragua is a very well known figure in Spain and he is very active in social circles and in the cultural world. He is widely recognized as a symbol of Spain's history and actively participates in the activities of several learned societies and Royal Academies (Asturias, 2015). His Lordship espouses a view of the discovery of the Americans as the creation of a new world and as the encounter between different civilizations (Asturias, 2015). This is the widely espoused view in Spain and it is supported by both the left and the right of the political spectrum.

His presence is highly sought after as a guest speaker and guest of honor. As part of his role, he has traveled all over the world, including several official trips to Latin American promoting the protection of the Spanish legacy in the New World. Official recognition of his role was further evidenced by the bestowal on the Duke by the King of the Order of Isabella the Catholic, the highest honor bestowed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Gila, 2015).

Who can claim the title of Tlatoani?

The active role of the Duke of Veragua in Spain as a cultural icon is not surprising and it parallels the role of the Duke of Wellington in the United Kingdom however one of the surprising ironies of history is that the two main direct descendants of Moctezuma II live in Spain and are both titled nobles (Salcedo, 2014). We will focus on the undisputed current head of the Imperial House of Moctezuma, namely His Most Excellent Lordship Juan José Marcilla de Teruel-Moctezuma y Valcárcel, 6th Duke of Moctezuma de Tultengo, Grandee of Spain (Salcedo, 2014). The Duke of Moctezuma is widely considered even by previous Mexican governments as the rightful heir to the Emperor Moctezuma II. His bloodline is clearly documented and his family has in their possession many important artifacts from the early colonial period. His Excellency is also very active socially and culturally. He was invited as a guest of honor by His Majesty King Juan Carlos I to the celebration of the 500th year anniversary of the discovery of America. His titles are officially recognized in Spain (Salcedo, 2014). The Duke has authored the epilogue to several important history books and often participates in documentaries about the Aztecs and the colonial period (Juan J. Marcilla de Teruel-Moctezuma, 2016).

The current Duke of Moctezuma has made his opinion very clear about the discovery of America and about the conquest both in writing and in many interviews. He espouses the position that Moctezuma II and his descendants were treated with respect by the Spanish monarchy and

that the encounter was beneficial to both sides (Juan J. Marcilla de Teruel-Moctezuma, 2016). This position follows the official version of the encounter of two cultures to create a new one.

The traditional title of Emperor in the Aztec Empire, Tlatoani, means the “one who speaks”, or the one who speaks for the empire to the gods (Clendinnen, 2014). One of the main challenges in the contemporary struggle over identity is that the person who is supposed to be the “great speaker” of the Aztec nation is a Spanish citizen and holds a title from the Spanish King (Salcedo, 2008). The original Aztec empire does not exist anymore and the processes of cultural diffusion, forced assimilation, and mestizaje have profoundly changed the demographic and cultural makeup of modern Mexico (Williamson, 1992). Moreover, it should be noted that the Aztecs were only one in many groups that peopled pre-columbian Mesoamerica.

Rituals of Re-enactment and Temporary “Possession” of the Descendants of Moctezuma II and Christopher Columbus

One of the interesting issues of the struggle over identity is how both the left and the right of the ideological spectrum emphasize the “blood” factor (Hillel, 2009). This is surprising in particular for the left because Marxist theory clearly discards this as an explanatory variable for social stratification (Stuart Sim, 2005). President Lopez Obrador of Mexico, who is clearly aligned with the ideological left, has chosen to emphasize the indigenous past of Mexico and has even formally requested Spain and the Catholic Church to apologize for the conquest and for the early colonial period (“AMLO pide a Iglesia y monarquía española que se disculpen por ‘atrocidades’ a pueblos originarios,” 2020). It should be noted that Lopez Obrador has a Spanish grandfather and that he requested the apology in Spanish. The paradox is that if blood is important then the Duke of Moctezuma would be best situated to serve as the “Great Speaker” of the Mexican “nation” rather than Lopez Obrador with a Spanish grandfather.

Archeologists and anthropologists agree that bloodline and ancestors were important for the Aztecs and for many other Mesoamerican cultures (Clendinnen, 2014). The same is also true of traditional Spanish elites which have historically placed a lot of emphasis on “blood lines” and “pureza de sangre” (Asturias, 2015; Oliveira, 1992; Salcedo, 2008). Therefore the direct descendants of the previously mentioned historical figures have been mobilized to somehow represent different ideological perspectives. There are important paradoxes in the contemporary re-enactment of this debate over the impact of the discovery of American and subsequent conquest of the continent by European powers. One of the first challenges is that the direct descendants of the two protagonists in question have taken a very conciliatory approach favoring reconciliation and integration rather than a revision of the history of the conquest. The current debate has the added challenge that the original protagonists are long gone. In the case of the paradigmatic South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the protagonists participated as witnesses, victims, and victimizers (O. v. Feigenblatt, 2008; Ottaway, 1993; Roht-Arriaza & Gibson, 1998; Rotberg & Thompson, 2000). The presence of the protagonists is important because according to many philosophical and psychological approaches to reconciliation, only the victim and the victimizer can enter a truly sincere dialogue leading to a shared truth and reconciliation (Benn, 1996; O. F. v. Feigenblatt, 2010; Frise & McMinn, 2010; Hook, Worthington, & Utsey, 2008).

The current debate over the discovery and conquest has instead recruited representatives to serve as the victims, victimizers, and witnesses in a very disorganized and informal “Truth and Reconciliation Commission”. Lopez Obrador claiming to the authority to represent Mesoamerican civilization, the current Pontiff representing the Catholic Church, the Duke of Veragua representing Christopher Columbus, the Duke of Moctezuma representing the bloodline of the last Aztec Emperor, and many pundits on both sides of the debate representing the “people” from over

five hundred years ago ("AMLO pide a Iglesia y monarquia espanola que se disculpen por "atrocidades" a pueblos originarios," 2020).

Evidence of the re-enactment can be found in the words themselves of the actors. "I am the 20th Christopher Columbus" is the introduction made by the current Duke of Veragua (Peris, 2019). "I don't like it when my ancestors are used for political gain" from the mouth of the current Duke of Moctezuma and the request for an apology made by the President of Mexico made on behalf of the "Mexican Nation" ("Descendiente de Moctezuma pidió a AMLO no usar la figura del emperador azteca con fines políticos," 2019) . The Duke followed his assertion with the following analysis of situation in Mexico "In Mexico they are more worried about the dead Indians than with the life ones" ("Descendiente de Moctezuma pidió a AMLO no usar la figura del emperador azteca con fines políticos," 2019). The previous examples of clear claims to legitimate authority, based on lineage and political office. A cursory discursive analysis reveals the contemporary actors engage in a momentary re-enactment of a hypothetical debate between the main protagonists of the "Great Encounter" or the "Clash of Civilizations". There is also evidence that the audience or audiences actively engage in the fiction of the re-enactment by accepting many of the implicit assumptions made by the actors ("AMLO pide a Iglesia y monarquia espanola que se disculpen por "atrocidades" a pueblos originarios," 2020; "Descendiente de Moctezuma pidió a AMLO no usar la figura del emperador azteca con fines políticos," 2019; Peris, 2019). For a moment the audience is not listening to Lopez Obrador the man who governs a modern nation-state but rather the representative of a millenarian civilization. The reporter is not facing a 21st century Spanish aristocrat who grew up during the transition to democracy but rather with the embodiment of the Great Admiral himself, Christopher Columbus. The contemporary Duke of Moctezuma is momentarily transformed into the specter of Moctezuma II.

The socially constructed nature of this spectral debate between the ghosts of the past and their modern world mediums can be momentarily fulfilling for the audience and for the actors involved but it can be very misleading and it can never reach a resolution; simply because the referent of the affront of the original dispute is no longer present. Most theories of conflict analysis and resolution emphasize the need to clearly identify the parties of a dispute and to guide them through a process of discovery so that they can identify their main interests and concerns (Augsburger, 1992; Avruch, 1998; Bercovitch, 1996; Bowman, 2001). The sheer magnitude of the problem in this case makes this very challenging and the distance from the original “offense” is over five hundred years. Moreover the request for a blanket apology from Lopez Obrador is very broad and ambiguous.

Conclusions

The present essay discusses the contemporary practice of conducting debates about the past through the re-enactment of history through the participation of modern mediums. It is doubtful that Lopez Obrador can truly encompass the feelings and wishes of an entire civilization while at the same time there is probably very little in common between the contemporary Dukes of Veragua and Moctezuma and their notable ancestors. The current King of Spain is a Bourbon with a graduate degree from Canada and the current Pope is from Argentina. Social scientists have discussed the challenges involved in reconstructing the past, in particular attempting to attribute wishes and personifying an entire civilization is a daunting and ultimately futile task (HSIN-HUANG, HSIAO, & WAN, 2007; Schwandner-Sievers, 2001).

One of the conclusions of the present exploratory essay is about the possible role for these modern day mediums in bringing about “truth and reconciliation” between different “nations”, countries, and historical truths. If we assume that peace and prosperity for the greatest number of

people is a common goal, then intellectuals and other influencers should guide the international dialogue towards peace and reconciliation rather than focus on stolid historical debates with very little impact on the actual descendants of both the supposed victims and victimizers. Dialogue between the two sides of the ideological divide is one of the ways to build greater trust and eventually build bridges leading to a jointly constructed future. One interesting step in this direction is the visit of a delegation of the Zapatista Liberation Army which is planned for 2021. The delegation commented on the request for an apology of Lopez Obrador to Spain and to the Catholic Church. "We will not echo the words of impostors who make claims on our blood to hide the fact that they have their hands stained with that same blood" (Espallargas, 2020).

Bibliography

Almuerzo de Verano con los Titulos del Reino. (2013). Retrieved from

<http://noblezadegalicia.org/2013/08/16/almuerzo-de-verano-con-los-titulos-del-reino/>

AMLO pide a Iglesia y monarquía española que se disculpen por "atrocidades" a pueblos

originarios. (2020). Retrieved from <https://www.dw.com/es/amlo-pide-a-iglesia-y-monarqu%C3%ADa-espa%C3%B1ola-que-se-disculpen-por-atrocidades-a-pueblos-originarios/a-55230873>

Asturias, C. d. l. N. d. P. d. (2015). *Cuerpo de la Nobleza del Principado de Asturias: Emblema.*

Retrieved from <http://www.cuerpodelanoblezadeasturias.es/historia/historiacuerpo/>

Augsburger, D. W. (1992). *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures: Pathways and Patterns* (First ed.). Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press.

Avruch, K. (1998). *Culture & Conflict Resolution*. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press.

- Benn, P. (1996). Forgiveness and Loyalty. *Philosophy*, 71(277), 369-383.
- Bercovitch, J. (Ed.) (1996). *Resolving International Conflicts*. London: Lynne Rienner.
- Bowman, G. (2001). The violence in identity. In B. E. Schmidt & I. W. Schröder (Eds.), *Anthropology of Violence and Conflict* (pp. 25-46). New York: Routledge.
- Castillo, B. D. d. (2008). *The History of the Conquest of New Spain* (D. Carrasco Ed.). Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Clendinnen, I. (2014). *Aztecs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cohen, R. (1996). Cultural Aspects of International Mediation. In J. Bercovitch (Ed.), *Resolving International Conflicts: The Theory and Practice of Mediation* (pp. 107-128). London: Lynne Rienner.
- Descendiente de Moctezuma pidió a AMLO no usar la figura del emperador azteca con fines políticos. (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.infobae.com/america/mexico/2019/04/02/descendiente-de-moctezuma-pidio-a-amlo-no-usar-la-figura-del-emperador-azteca-con-fines-politicos/>
- Elenco de Ordenes de Caballeria e Instituciones Afines*. (2005). Madrid: Academia de Genealogia, Nobleza y Armas Alfonso XIII.
- Espallargas, A. (2020). Los zapatistas no creen que España deba disculparse por la conquista como exige López Obrador. Retrieved from https://www.abc.es/internacional/abci-ezln-no-cree-espana-deba-disculparse-conquista-como-exige-lopez-obrador-202010061757_noticia.html
- Feigenblatt, O. F. v. (2010). Forgiveness and Culture: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue. *Journal of History & Social Sciences*, 1(1).

- Feigenblatt, O. v. (2008). The South African transition: A holistic approach to the analysis of the struggle leading to the 1994 elections. *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences*, 1(1), 48-80.
- Fernandez-Armesto, F. (2003). *The Americas: The History of a Hemisphere* (Paperback ed.). London: Phoenix.
- Folan, W. J., Bolles, D. D., & Ek, J. D. (2016). On the Trail of Quetzalcoatl/Kukulcan: Tracing Mythic Interaction Routes and Networks in the Maya Lowlands. *Ancient Mesoamerica*, 27(2), 293-318.
- Friedman, T. L. (2000). *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization* (Revised ed.). New York: Farrar Straus Giroux.
- Friedman, T. L. (2011). *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Frise, N. R., & McMinn, M. R. (2010). Forgiveness and Reconciliation: The Differing Perspectives of Psychologists and Christian Theologians. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 38(2), 83-90.
- Gila, A. d. C.-E. y. (2015). *La Real y Americana Orden de Isabel la Catolica (1815-2015)*. Madrid: Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores y de Cooperacion, Boletin Oficial del Estado.
- Hillel, P. T. (2009). Contesting Zapata: Differing Meanings of the Mexican National Idea. *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences*, 1(2), 269-291.
- Hook, J. N., Worthington, E. L., & Utsey, S. O. (2008). Collectivism, Forgiveness, and Social Harmony. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 37(6), 821-847.
- HSIN-HUANG, HSIAO, M., & WAN, P.-S. (2007). The Experiences of Cultural Globalizations in Asia-Pacific. *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, 8(3), 361-376.

Huntington, S. P. (2003). *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*

(Paperback Edition 2003 ed.). New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks.

Iwabuchi, K. (2008). "Soft" Nationalism and Narcissism: Japanese Popular Culture Goes Global.

Asian Studies Review, 26(4), 447-469.

Juan J. Marcilla de Teruel-Moctezuma, D. d. M. (2016). Epilogo. In J. A. R. Pinilla (Ed.), *Los*

Invencibles de America (pp. 219-220). Madrid: El Gran Capitan Ediciones.

Muhametzyanov, R. R., Usmanova, I. R., & Somkina, N. A. (2019). From Myth to History: The

Emergence of Historiographical Tradition in China. *Journal of History, Culture & Art*

Research, 8(3), 389-396.

Murphy, C. (2009). Populism Erodes Thailand's Old Order. *Far Eastern Economic Review*,

172(5), 7-12.

Oliveira, P. C. d. (1992). *Nobleza y Elites tradicionales analogas en las alocuciones de Pio XII*

al Patriciado y a la Nobleza romana. Madrid: Fernando III El Santo.

Ottaway, M. (1993). *South Africa: The Struggle for a New Order*. Washington D.C: The

Brookings Institution.

Peris, J. (2019). Yo soy el Cristóbal Colón número 20. Retrieved from

<https://www.eltiempo.com/bocas/yo-soy-el-cristobal-colon-numero-20-380400>

Pruitt, D., & Kim, S. H. (2004). *Social Conflict: Escalation, Stalemate and Settlement* (3rd ed.).

New York: McGraw Hill.

Reksirisuk, C. (2009). Preah Vihear as the last struggle, how history will remember you.

Prachatai, (Wednesday, 23 September). Retrieved from

<http://www.prachatai.com/english/node/686>

- Roht-Arriaza, N., & Gibson, L. (1998). The Developing Jurisprudence on Amnesty. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 20(4), 843-885.
- Rotberg, R. I., & Thompson, D. (Eds.). (2000). *Truth v. Justice: The Morality of Truth Comissions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Salcedo, J. M. S. (2008). *Nobleza española: grandeza inmemorial, 1520*. Madrid: Vision Libros.
- Salcedo, J. M. S. (2014). *Nobleza Espanola Grandeza Inmemorial 1520*. Madrid: Vision Libros.
- Schwandner-Sievers, S. (2001). The enactment of 'tradition': Albanian constructions of identity, violence and power in times of crisis. In B. E. Schmidt & I. W. Schröder (Eds.), *Anthropology of Violence and Conflict* (pp. 97-120). New York: Routledge.
- Spain, R. H. o. (2013). Audiencia a representaciones del Ayuntamiento de Viana, del Real Estamento del Principado de Gerona y del Cuerpo de la Nobleza del Principado de Asturias. Retrieved from http://www.casareal.es/EN/actividades/Paginas/actividades_actividades_detalle.aspx?dat a=11550
- Spanish Coat of Arms. (2014). Retrieved from http://www.americanschoolofgenealogy.com/spanish_coat-of-arms
- Stuart Sim, B. V. L. (2005). *Introducing Critical Theory*. London: Icon Books.
- Williamson, E. (1992). *The Penguin History of Latin America* (Paperback ed.). London: Penguin Books.