

THE MYTHS OF MOCTEZUMA'S GREETING TO HERNANDO CORTÉS:

Understanding how historians analyze primary sources

“One of the possible myths associated with the Conquest of Mexico is the idea Moctezuma more or less surrendered his political power to the Spanish king and to Hernando Cortés. Moctezuma seems to have done so at the very first meeting. The English-language translations transcribed below supposedly record Moctezuma’s speech to Cortés, but they come from two different perspectives and were driven by at least two different purposes. The first is one of the best-known accounts, coming from a manuscript written by Cortés himself, part of a letter addressed to king Carlos. The second comes from a Nahuatl-language account written by Nahua men in or around 1555. They were working under the direction of a Franciscan friar named Fray Bernardino de Sahagún; the excerpt presented here comes from “Book 12” of the friar’s Florentine Codex” (Haskett).

Directions: As you read through each account, answer the questions to help you further understand the sources as well as the analysis and interpretation of its significance.

Moctezuma’s Welcome, according to Hernando Cortés (*Cortés, Hernando*)

1. How does Cortes portray Montezuma?
2. What does he claim Montezuma tells him?
3. What motive would he have of conveying these ideas?
4. Why does Montezuma seem willing to give over control to Cortes?

Moctezuma’s Welcome, according to the Nahua authors of the Florentine Codex (*Lockhart, James*)

5. How would you describe Moctezuma’s tone in this excerpt?
6. Why would the Nahua version also give evidence of Montezuma’s ceding control?

From Professor Robert Haskett:

7. How does Professor Haskett account for the Nahua portrayal of Montezuma?
8. How does he explain the honorifics used by Montezuma to refer to Cortes?
9. What is the explanation Haskett offers for the different cultural interpretations of the gifts given by Montezuma to Cortes?

Reflection questions:

10. Do you think these explanations are plausible? Why?
11. How might you respond to Professor Haskett’s final question: How might all of these factors have made themselves felt in the Nahua and Spanish memories of the event recorded here?

I. Moctezuma's Welcome, according to Hernando Cortés

Cortés, Hernando, 5 Letters of Cortés to the Emperor , translated by J. Bayard Morris (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1928), 69-71

“When we had passed this bridge Mutezuma himself came out to meet us with some two hundred nobles.... Mutezuma himself was borne along in the middle of the street with two lords, one on his right hand and one on his left.... The two lords bore him along each by an arm, and as he drew near I dismounted and advanced alone to embrace [him], but the two lords prevented me from touching him, and they themselves made me the same obeisance as did their comrades, kissing the earth....

[Mutezuma brought] many various ornaments of gold, silver and featherwork, and some five or six thousand cotton clothes, richly dyed and embroidered in various ways, and having made me a present of them, he...addressed me in this manner: ‘Long time have we been informed by the writings of our ancestors that neither myself nor any of those who inhabit this land are natives of it, but rather strangers who have come to it from foreign parts. We likewise know that from those parts our nation was led by a certain lord (to whom all were subject), and who then went back to his native land, where he remained so long delaying his return that at his coming those whom he had left had married the women of the land and had many children by them and had built themselves cities in which they lived, so that they would in no wise return to their own land nor acknowledge him as lord; upon which he left them. And we have always believed that among his descendants one would surely come to subject this land and us as rightful vassals. Now seeing the regions from which you say you come, which is from where the sun rises, and the news you tell of this king and ruler who sent you hither, we believe and hold it certain that he is our natural lord.... Wherefore be certain that we will obey you and hold you as lord in place of that great lord of whom you speak, in which service there shall be neither slackness nor deceit: and throughout all the land, that is to say all that I rule, you may command anything you desire, and it shall be obeyed and done, and all that we have is at your will and pleasure. And since you are in your own land and house, rejoice and take your leisure from the fatigues of your journey and the battles you have fought....”

II. Moctezuma's Welcome, according to the Nahua authors of the Florentine Codex

Lockhart, James, trans. and ed., We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1993), 115-119.

“When Moteucçoma reached the Spaniards, at the place they call Huitzillan, ..there Moteucçoma himself put a necklace of gold and fine stones on Captain don Hernando Cortés, and gave flowers and garlands to all the other captains. After Moteucçoma himself had given this present, as they were accustomed to do, don Hernando Cortés asked Moteucçoma himself [if it was he], and Moteucçoma replied, ‘I am Moteucçoma.’ Then he prostrated himself before the captain, doing him great reverence, and then he raised himself face to face with the captain, very close to him. He began to speak to him in this fashion:

‘O our lord, you are very welcome, you have reached your land, your settlement, your home Mexico. You have come to sit on your throne and seat, which I have possessed for some days in your name. Other lords, now dead, had it before me...I have come last of all to rule and have charge of this your settlement of Mexico. We have all borne your commonwealth on our backs. Your deceased vassals can no longer see or know what is happening now. Would to the Giver of Life that one of them were alive now, and in his presence would occur what is occurring in mine; but they are absent. Our lord, I am not asleep or dreaming; with my eyes I see your face and your person. For some time I have been expecting this, for some time my heart has been looking in the direction from which you have come, having emerged from within the clouds and mists, a place hidden to all. That is surely what the kings who are gone announced, that you would come to rule these realms and that you would assume your throne and seat. Now I see that what they announced is true. You are very welcome; you have undergone great travails in coming such a long way; rest now. Here are your home and your palaces; take them and rest in them with all your captains and companions who have come with you.’

When Moteucçoma had finished giving his speech, Marina [La Malinche] interpreted it for don Hernando Cortés. When don Hernando Cortés understood what Moteucçoma had said, he said to Marina, ‘Tell Moteucçoma to console himself, relax, and not be afraid, for I and all who are coming with me like him very much; he will receive no harm from anyone. It has given us great pleasure to see him and make his acquaintance, as we have wished to do for a long time now. Our desire has been fulfilled, and we have come to his home, Mexico. We will speak at leisure.’”

From Professor Robert Haskett:

Cortés was writing to justify his actions and to legitimize his attempts to defeat and control the so-called Aztec Empire. If the Aztec emperor had actually and voluntarily placed himself and his realm under Spanish rule, then the question of legitimacy was definitively answered, and the subsequent “rebellion” against the Spaniards by the Aztecs and their allies was justifiably put down with great force. Equally justified was the usurpation of Aztec imperial sovereignty and its transfer to Cortés on behalf of the distant king.

On this basis, alone, it is wise to be somewhat skeptical of the Cortés account. One might expect the Nahuatl rendition to be entirely different, and to lack any hint that Moctezuma was voluntarily ceding his sovereignty and his empire to the newcomers. Yet it seems as if even the Nahua authors of this excerpt ended up agreeing with the Spaniards that Moctezuma had in some way relinquished his ruling authority. Moctezuma is portrayed elsewhere in the Nahuatl text as a leader bedeviled by superstitious fears that his and the Aztecs’ fall was preordained and inevitable. Descriptions of frightening omens, among other things, preceded the account of Moctezuma’s welcome of Cortés to Tenochtitlan in “Book 12” of the Florentine Codex. Knowing these things, what can we make of this excerpt?

There are several other things to remember about these accounts, and particularly the Nahuatl-language one, while you are reading them. It is easier to see how the author’s personal and political agendas were being advanced in the Cortés account than to glimpse indigenous viewpoints in the Sahagún text. But here are some things to know that may help you assess the latter text, and even to glimpse some authentic “indigenous” elements in the excerpt from Cortés’s letter: The Nahua authors gathered and then edited information they received from other Nahua informants, most of the latter of whom were probably men of elevated social status. Moreover, most of these informants, and many of the Nahua authors, were from Tlatelolco, the “twin” island city to Tenochtitlan that had been conquered by the latter around a generation before the arrival of the Spaniards on the scene. Could there have been some lingering resentment on the part of the Tlatelolcas about their subjugation to the Aztecs expressed here? The Nahua authors were also working under what might be called the editorship of the Spaniard Sahagún. He would have had at least some control over the way in which the material in the text was presented, was probably quite familiar with the standard Spanish renditions of the pivotal meeting between the Aztec ruler and the would-be conqueror, and may have introduced number of changes before the actual account was produced in its surviving form around 1570; the first version of 1555 came

at least a generation after the events described in it took place, while the “final” Nahuatl text appeared two or three generations after the dust of conquest had settled, and after nearly everyone who had witnessed the events were long dead. Over these decades, how might the Nahuatl text have been crafted by both Nahuas and the friar-editor to explain why the Spanish had managed to defeat the Aztecs (and with them the Tlatelolcans)?

Such considerations aside, it is possible to detect standard polite, diplomatic rhetoric in the Nahuatl text, and even in the Spanish one. Nowadays in Mexico the polite way to greet a guest at the door is to welcome them something like this: “welcome to your home, make yourself comfortable (etc.).” In other words, there is a kind of inversion here, when the actual owner of the home greets the newcomer as its owner, a fancy and very friendly way of saying “welcome, come on in.” This polite convention has its roots in the elevated, ornate rhetoric of noble-class Nahuas of precontact times. A noble male would address a humble commoner man as “my father,” while the latter would call his actual social superior “my son.” A ruler’s throne could be called a seat belonging to a visitor; a ruler’s palace was the home of a newcomer being welcomed politely. This kind of linguistic inversion was everywhere, in other words.¹ So you should read the Nahuatl and Spanish texts with this tradition in mind. Does this change the way we might interpret these accounts?

Finally, keep in mind that the Aztecs believed that they were descended from migrants who came to the Valley of Mexico from elsewhere. Remember that Moctezuma must have been keeping himself informed about the arrival and activities of the Spaniards long before they arrived at

Tenochtitlan. Bear in mind that lavish gift giving was a traditional part of Mesoamerican diplomacy as practiced by peoples such as the Aztecs, and that particularly rich gifts signaled political power and could even amount to a kind of threat (“beware, we’re so rich and powerful that we can afford to give you these things”). Those accepting such gifts were acknowledging the status of the gift givers. Moctezuma’s speech was given in Nahuatl, which most Spaniards did not understand at that time. Cortés relied on a translation made by his ally and interpreter, doña Marina, just as Moctezuma and the other Aztecs had to rely on doña Marina to interpret what Cortés said to them. How might all of these factors have made themselves felt in the Nahua and Spanish memories of the event recorded here?