

Document A: Cortés's Account

When we had passed the bridge, Señor Muteczuma came out to receive us, attended by about two hundred nobles, all barefooted and dressed in livery, or a peculiar garb of fine cotton, richer than is usually worn; they came in two processions in close proximity to the houses on each side of the street, which is very wide and beautiful, and so straight that you can see from one end of it to the other, although it is two thirds of a league in length, having both sides large and elegant houses and temples. Muteczuma came through the centre of the street, attended by two lords, one upon his right, and the other upon his left hand, one of whom was the same nobleman who, as I have mentioned, came to meet me in a litter; and the other was the brother of Muteczuma lord of the city of Iztapalapa, which I had left the same day; all three were dressed in the same manner, except that Muteczuma wore shoes, while the others were without them. He was supported on the arms of both, and as we approached, I alighted and advanced alone to salute him; but the two attendant lords stopped me to prevent my touching him, and they and he both performed the ceremony of kissing the ground; after which he directed his brother who accompanied him to remain with me; the latter accordingly took me by the arm, while Muteczuma, with his other attendant, walked a short distance in front of me, and after he had spoken to me, all the other nobles also came up to address me, and then went away in two processions with great regularity, one after the other, and in this manner returned to the city. At the time I advanced to speak to Muteczuma, I took off from myself a collar of pearls and glass diamonds, and put it around his neck. After having proceeded along the street, one of his servants came bringing two collars formed of shell fish, enclosed in a roll of cloth, which were made from the shells of colored prawns or periwinkles, held by them in high estimation; and from each collar depended eight golden prawns, finished in a very perfect manner, about a foot and a half in length. When these were brought, Muteczuma turned towards me and put them round my neck; he then returned along the street in the order already described, until he reached a very large and splendid palace, in which we were to be quartered, which had been fully prepared for our reception. He there took me by the hand and led me into a spacious saloon, in front of which was a court, through which we entered. Having caused me to sit down on a piece of rich carpeting, which he had ordered to be made for his own use, he told me to wait his return there, and then went away. After a short space of time, when my people were all bestowed in their quarters, he returned with many and various jewels of gold and silver, feather-work, and five or six thousand pieces of cotton cloth, very rich and of varied texture and finish. After having presented these to me, he sat down on another piece of carpet they had placed for him near me, and being seated he discoursed as follows: —

"It is now a long time since, by means of written records, we learn from our ancestors that neither myself nor any of those who inhabit this region were descended from its original inhabitants, but from strangers who emigrated hither from a very distant land; and we have also learned that a prince, whose vassals they all were, conducted our people into these parts, and then returned to his native land. He afterwards came again to this country, after the lapse of much time, and found that his people had intermarried with the native inhabitants, by whom they had many children, and had built towns in which they resided; and when he desired them to return with him, they were unwilling to go, nor were they disposed to acknowledge him as their sovereign; so he departed from the country, and we have always heard that his descendants would come to conquer this land, and reduce us to subjection as his vassals; and according to the direction from which you say you have come, namely, the quarter where the sun rises, and from what you say of the great lord or king who sent you hither, we believe and are assured that he is our natural sovereign, especially as you say that it is a long time since you first had knowledge of us. Therefore be assured that we will obey you, and acknowledge you for our sovereign in place of the great lord whom you mention, and that there shall be no default or deception on our part. And you have the power in all this land, I mean wherever my power extends, to command what is your pleasure, and it shall be done in obedience thereto, and all that we have is at your disposal. And since you are in your own proper land and your own house, rest and refresh yourselves after the toils of your journey, and the conflicts in which you have been engaged, which have been brought upon you, as I well know, by all the people from Puntunchan to this palace; and I am aware that the Cempoallans and Tlascalans have told you much evil of me, but believe no more than you see with your own eyes, especially from those who are my enemies, some of whom were once my subjects, and having rebelled upon your arrival, make these statements to ingratiate themselves in your favor. These people, I know, have informed you that I possessed houses with walls of gold, and that my carpets and other things in common use were of the texture of gold; and that I was a god, or made myself one, and many other such things. The houses you see are of stone and lime and earth." . . . I answered him in respect to all that he said, expressing my acknowledgments, and adding whatever the occasion seemed to demand, especially endeavoring to confirm him in the belief that your Majesty was the sovereign they had looked for.

Source: Letter by Hernán Cortés to King Charles V, written in 1520.

Document B: The Florentine Codex

And when the Spaniards had arrived at Xoloco, Moctezuma dressed and prepared himself to meet them with other great rulers and princes, his major men and nobles. They then went to meet him [Cortés]. They arranged beautiful flowers in gourds used for vases, in the midst of sunflowers and magnolias, they placed popcorn flowers, yellow magnolias, and cacao blooms, and they made these into wreaths for the head and for garlands. And they wore golden necklaces, necklaces with pendants, and necklaces with [precious] stones.

And when Moctezuma went to meet them at Huitzillan, he bestowed gifts on Cortés; he gave him flowers, he put necklaces on him; he hung garlands around him and put wreaths on his head. Then he laid out before him the golden necklaces, all of his gifts [for the Spaniards]. He ended by putting some of the necklaces on him.

The Cortés asked him: "Is it not you? Are you not he? Are you Moctezuma?"

And Moctezuma responded: "Yes, I am Moctezuma." Then he stood up to welcome Cortés, to meet him face to face. He bowed his head low, stretched as far as he could, and stood firm.

Then he addressed him in these words: "Our lord, you are very welcome in your arrival in this land. You have come to satisfy your curiosity about your noble city of Mexico. You have come here to sit on your throne, to sit under its canopy, which I have kept for awhile for you. For the rulers and governors [of past times] have gone: Itzcoatl, Moctezuma I, Axayacatl, Tīcōcīc, and Ahuitzotl. [Since they are gone], your poor vassal has been in charge for you, to govern the city of Mexico. Will they come back to the place of their absence? If even one came, he might witness the marvel that has taken place in my time, see what I am seeing, as the only descendent of our lords. For I am not just dreaming, not just sleepwalking, not seeing you in my dreams. I am not just dreaming that I have seen you and have looked at you face to face. I have been worried for a long time, looking toward the unknown from which you have come, the mysterious place. For our rulers departed, saying that you would come to your city and sit upon your throne. And now it has been fulfilled, you have returned. Go enjoy your palace, rest your body. Welcome our lords to this land."

When Moctezuma finished his speech, which he directed toward the Marquis, Marina explained and interpreted it for him. And when the Marquis had heard what Moctezuma had said, he spoke to Marina in a babbling tongue: "Tell Moctezuma to not be afraid, for we greatly esteem him. Now we are satisfied because we have seen him in person and heard his voice. For until now, we have wanted to see him face to face. And now we have seen him, we have come to his home in Mexico, slowly he will hear our words."

Thereupon, Cortés took Moctezuma by the hand and led him by it. They walked with him, stroking his hair, showing their esteem. And the Spaniards looked at him, each examining him closely. They walked on foot, then mounted and dismounted in order to look at him.

Source: *The Florentine Codex, an account of Aztec life originally written by Mexican natives between 1570-1585 under the supervision of Spanish friar Bernardino de Sahagún, whose primary goal was to convert the natives of Mexico to Christianity.*

Document C: Historian Matthew Restall

Excerpt 1

How does the Nahuatl version of this speech, recorded in the *Florentine Codex*, compare to the Spanish one? The Conquest narrative in the *Codex* was written down several generations after the events described, and was the product of a Franciscan-Nahua collaboration. In addition, Moctezuma's reputation had suffered in the decades between his death and the compilation of the *Codex*, and this may be reflected in this version of the speech. Still, the *Codex* version is close enough to the Cortés-Díaz versions to suggest that the Spanish accounts were interpretations of what Moctezuma actually said. . . . The theme of a long-anticipated returning lord is not only clearly present, but is the device upon which the speech is constructed. It is easy to imagine how these words could become in Spanish minds a declaration of submission, especially if one takes into account the filter of Malinche's translation, Spanish ignorance of the Mexica cultural context, and Spanish wishful thinking on the day of the meeting for a friendly reception. Furthermore, Cortés was concerned to project to the king a positive scenario at the time he wrote down the speech (that was the following year, when the Spaniards had been defeated in the first battle of Tenochtitlán and expelled from the city). . . .

However, this does not explain why Moctezuma's speech was so seemingly deferential. In Mexica culture—as indeed in most Mesoamerican cultures—the language of polite speech was highly developed. Elite children were taught the skill of address appropriate to the age, gender, and social standing of the addressee, and the circumstances of the meeting. This type of elaborate Nahuatl is usually called *huehuehtlahtolli* (ancient discourse or sayings of the elders) and a considerable amount is known about such speech and its model dialogues because many were written down in the late sixteenth century (60 alone in the *Florentine Codex*).

Within the larger genre of *huehuehtlahtolli*, the only style of address that could be used in Moctezuma's presence would have been *tecpillahtolli* (lordly speech), in which Nahuatl words are heavily laden with the reverential prefixes and suffixes and sentences are built upon the principles of indirection and reversal. In other words, to be polite and courteous one must avoid speaking bluntly or directly, which requires saying the opposite of what one means. Thus Moctezuma's assertion that he and his predecessors were just safeguarding the rulership of the Mexica empire in anticipation of Cortés's arrival is not to be taken literally. It is a rhetorical artifice meant to convey the opposite—Moctezuma's stature and multigenerational legitimacy—and to function as a courteous welcome to an important guest. It is a royal *mi casa, su casa* welcome whose offer to courtly hospitality would be utterly undermined if taken as a literal handing over of the keys to the kingdom. Even the claim to be poor and mortal as any man, not included in the Nahuatl or Spanish texts of the *Codex* but in the Cortés-Gómara versions, was very possibly delivered by Moctezuma as a piece of contrived humility intended to underscore his imperial status.

Malinche was able to understand *tecpillahtolli*, a legacy of her noble birth, and she had been translating it into Spanish for months leading up to the Cortés-Moctezuma meeting. Otherwise, Moctezuma's speech could not have been conveyed to Cortés and his colleagues with any degree of fidelity. But even with the benefit of Malinche's education, when rendered in Spanish, with the polite adornments of Nahuatl prefixes and suffixes gone, and the principle of courteous reversal lost by the lack of genuine equivalent in Iberian culture, the speech does indeed seem to be one of surrender.

Excerpt 2

Similarly, Bernal Díaz's account contains no consistent evidence of Spaniards being taken for gods. According to Díaz, some Cempoalans (Gulf coast natives) exclaim upon learning of guns, "Sure they [the Spaniards] must be *teules!*" *Teules* is usually translated as "gods," but the term is more ambiguous than that. The Nahuatl for "god" is *teotl*, *teteoh* in the plural, but it has a less restricting

meaning than the English “god” or Spanish *dios*. It could be combined with other words, for example, to qualify them not as specifically godly or godlike, but as fine, fancy, large, powerful, and so on. Thus, without the substantiating support of other evidence, the casual nicknaming of Spaniards as *teules* suggests a recognition not of divine status but of their political and military significance in the region. Furthermore, there is no follow-up to this moment to show that Cempoalans really did adopt the notion of Spanish apotheosis. . . .

As for Cortés himself, he neither names Teudilli/Tendile nor mentions any tales of wonder, referring to him as a local lord who offered gold and provisions to the Spaniards (as native rulers often did to avoid hostilities and encourage the invaders to move on). In his letters to the king Cortés makes no claims to having been taken either was Huitzilopochtli or Quetzalcoatl (whom he never mentions at all) or any kind of god. His concern is more to establish the political legitimacy of his invasion and, in letters written before Tenochtitlán has fallen, to convince the king that despite ongoing hostilities the Mexica empire had already in some sense been ceded to Spain.

Perhaps it is not surprising that we find over references to the apotheosis of the Spaniards in accounts by the Franciscans, whose concerns were more religious than political, and whose emphasis was on the legitimacy and divine approval of Christianization campaigns. Writing in the 1530s, fray Toribio de Benavente, who took the name Motolinía, claimed that the Nahuas “called the Castilians *teteuh*, which is to say gods, and the Castilians, corrupting the word, said *teules*.” Whereas Díaz omits discussion of the origins or implications of the term *teules*, Motolinía seizes upon it as supposed evidence that Mexico’s natives somehow anticipated the arrival of the Spaniards—an anticipation that proved the Conquest was part of God’s plan for the Americas. For this reason, Franciscans such as Motolinía appear to have invented the Cortés-Quetzalcoatl identification after the Conquest.

The most fully developed version of the Quetzalcoatl aspect of the myth is found in Sahagún’s *Florentine Codex*. Because the text was written in Nahuatl as well as Spanish and was compiled using native informants, it has mistakenly been taken as gospel evidence of native reactions to the invasion. In fact, the *Codex* is a native *and* Franciscan source, as Sahagún conceived, compiled, and formulated the questionnaires for all 12 volumes between about 1547 and 1579. Box XII (on the Conquest) was first drafted about 1555, 35 years after Moctezuma’s death, when the *Codex*’s informants would not have been old enough to know what went on before and during the war, or would not have been directly privy to the emperor’s thoughts, words, and deeds. The informants were from Tlatelolco, the original Mexica island city that in the fifteenth century had become subsumed into Tenochtitlán but retained some semblance of separate identity. Its people usually called themselves Tlatelolca, rarely Mexica, and as Tlatelolco was the last part of the island to fall to the Spaniards, Tlatelolcans blamed the Mexica-Tenochca for the defeat. As a result, Moctezuma receives harsh treatment in the *Codex*, which portrays him as vacillating, inert with anxiety, terrorized by omens predicting his downfall, and ingratiating to the Spaniards.

Source: Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest, written by Matthew Restall in 2003.