

Reimagining Mexica Identity

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Project Overview

Background Information: The deliberate destruction of Mexica history occurred during the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire led by Hernan Cortes during 1519 to 1521. While Spanish conquistadors were at fault for this destruction, Spanish missionaries and historians alongside Indigenous scholars intended to preserve a part of what had been lost. Therefore, the 16th century was a period heavily devoted towards the restoration of Mexica history and culture. However, Spanish accounts of Mexica history have produced distorted and degrading characterizations of the Mexica, such as cannibals and bloodthirsty barbarians. Yet these distorted accounts have been more influential amongst historians in this field up to the mid-20th century. More recently, the few Indigenous accounts along with archaeological evidence have provided counternarratives to disprove the harmful misinformation spread by Spanish conquistadors, historians and missionaries. My work builds on this more recent scholarship.

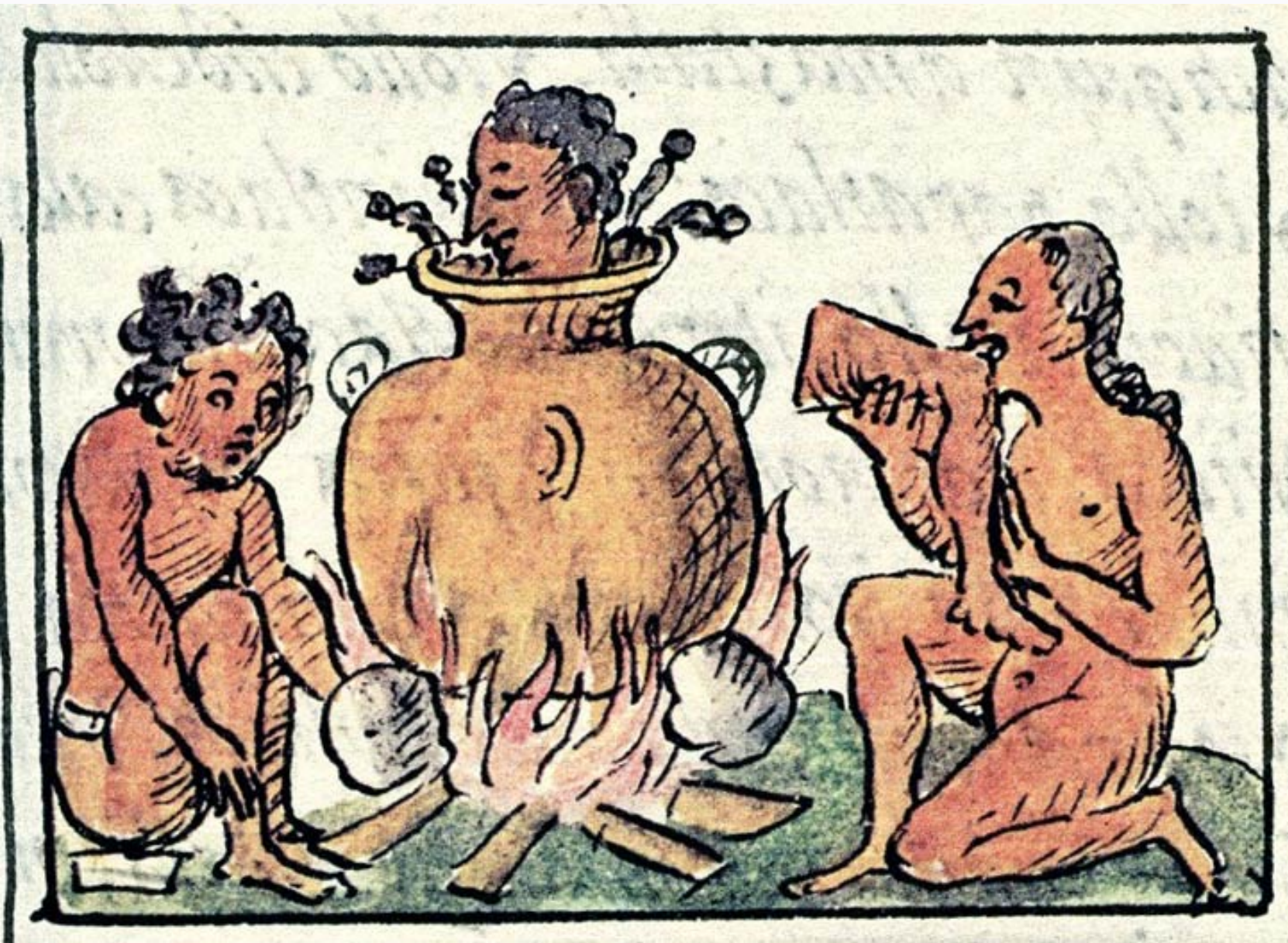
Research Question: How did the Spanish construct a distorted imaginary surrounding Mexica identity and culture?

Thesis Statement: The Spanish shaped Mexica identity through a combination of narratives which 1) accused them of barbarian lifestyles, 2) portrayed their history as subject to Western tradition, and 3) characterized Indigenous figures of the conquest as traitors or deserving of betrayal.

16th Century Primary Sources

- **Conquistadors:** Hernan Cortes and Bernal Diaz del Castillo
- **Spanish Historians:** Francisco Lopez de Gomara, Bernal Diaz del Castillo, and Tovar Codex
- **Friars:** Bernardino de Sahagun, Toribio de Motolinia, and Diego Duran
- **Indigenous Authors:** Tezozomoc, Chimalpahin, and Ixtlilxochitl
- **Multi-Authored Indigenous Documents:** Annals of Tlatelolco, Aubin Codex, Codex Mendoza, Codex Moctezuma, and Cantares Mexicanos

The Narrative of Barbarism



Florentine Codex, Book IV: This image depicts the fate of a Mexica “bathed slave” on feast day 1-Death: ““He will die sacrificed as a war captive. They will cook him and eat him”. Cannibalism was not a casual activity among the Mexica and was limited to specific circumstances. Furthermore, cannibalism has been utilized as an act of trickery against enemies and within Mexica folklore amongst deities.

The Narrative of Westernized History



Florentine Codex, Book XII: This image represents the first evil omen which states that “a tongue of fire, appeared in the heavens in the east for a full year causing panic among the people”. The language of “tongue of fire” alludes to the Bible in the event of Pentecost. Furthermore, this omen also alludes to the Western rendition of the conquest of an empire employed by classical writers such as Josephus. For example, the visions of a comet in the sky of Jerusalem, similarly, presaged its conquest.

The Narrative of Betrayal



Codex Moctezuma: Moctezuma addresses his people on a balcony with a rope tied to his neck held by a Spaniard. He urged his people to stop fighting since “[the Mexica] were no match”. This was later taken out of context to represent Moctezuma as cowardly, interested in only saving himself. Additionally, Cortes claimed that the angry Mexica warriors stoned Moctezuma to death. Therefore, this narrative has depicted Moctezuma betraying his people as well as the Mexica betraying their leader.

Source Spotlight: Florentine Codex



The *Florentine Codex* (1578-79) is a bilingual ethnography on Mexica history, based on Bernardino de Sahagun’s *General History of the Things in New Spain* (1569). The Spanish translations appear on the left column. Oftentimes, images are illustrated within the codex and appear only on the left column. Therefore, the Spanish translations are very brief.

Quote Spotlight

“The books written by sixteenth-century Spaniards...encourage readers to believe that the people whom the conquistadors defeated were barbaric in the extreme, that God willed the end of their civilization as it encapsulated all that was wrong with human nature.”

Camilla Townsend, *Fifth Sun: A New History of the Aztecs*, 2019

Findings

- 16th century Spanish-authored sources contributed to a harmful imaginary regarding Mexica identity that is in effect today
- The incorporation of Western and Biblical symbols in the framing of Mexica ethnographies were both intentional and unintentional
- Indigenous sources employ counternarratives which challenge the Spanish perspective of Mexica identity