

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10634-4 - Theatre in Latin America: Religion, Politics, and Culture from Cortes to the 1980s

Adam Versenyi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

Religion, politics, and theatre: Cortés greets the twelve Franciscans

In 1519 Hernán Cortés landed on the Mexican mainland. By 1522 he had conquered the Aztec capital and converted it into the captaincy general of Nueva España, the headquarters from which he was to launch his conquest of the rest of Central America. In the spring of 1524 the twelve Franciscan friars requested by Cortés to take charge of the Indians' religious instruction arrived in Mexico City – Tenochtitlán. When Cortés was told of their approach he went to greet them on the outskirts of the city. Accompanied by most of his Spanish soldiers and a long procession of Indian leaders, Cortés knelt and kissed each friar's hands. His soldiers did the same and the Indians followed suit. Bound together in this one historical incident are three interwoven threads that have characterized Latin American history both prior to the Conquest and until the present day. In the simplicity and power of Cortés' action can be seen the interconnected strands of religion, politics, and theatre. While there is no one incident that reflects this triad in the European contact with the Maya and Inca cultures, the history of their conquest contains the same clear combination of forces.

That the same man who included theatrical entertainment for his troops, in the form of a puppeteer, on his expedition to conquer Hibueras in Guatemala, left history with such a brilliantly dramatic display should come as no surprise.¹ But Cortés was much more than a military leader with a theatrical flair; he was also an astute politician. He had expressly requested that Franciscan friars be the first to undertake Christianization of the New World, and his reasons for such a request were manifold. On a practical level, the Franciscans were the best prepared to undertake such a mission. The followers of the Franciscan rule established by Juan de Guadalupe, from the ranks of which the twelve sent to Cortés were chosen, already had the experience of evangelical work amongst the rural peasants and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10634-4 - Theatre in Latin America: Religion, Politics, and Culture from Cortes to the 1980s

Adam Versenyi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

neglected townspeople of the province of Granada, a region which had been newly conquered from Moors. A bull issued by Pope Alexander VI in 1496 had given the Franciscans the status of *predicadores apostólicos*, in order to enable them “throughout the world among the faithful and the infidel, [to] preach the word of God and the Holy Gospel.” Juan de Guadalupe’s disciples carried out the evangelical mission of Christianizing the Moslem farmers and townspeople that none of their colleagues would attempt. Such work amidst an alien people, language, and culture within Spain itself perfectly prepared the Franciscans for the role Cortés had chosen for them.²

Politically, the mendicants were the logical choice for Cortés. Their conversion of the Indians’ souls would be the necessary complement to his conquest of their bodies. In addition, Franciscan mysticism and vows of poverty ensured that they would not attempt to usurp his secular power and authority. The Franciscans, in fact, were the perfect allies, for they could be counted upon not only to hold the Indians in sway, but also to help Cortés check the worldly aspirations of the Spanish colonists, the royal officials, and the Court of Spain, by giving him a spiritual and theological basis for his authority. He thus lost no time in securing such an alliance. By kneeling and kissing their hands (the friars prevented him from kissing their garments), Cortés “conquered” the astonished Franciscans, “converting” them into his allies. The far-reaching nature of this act can be seen in the pages of the *Historia eclesiástica indiana* by the Franciscan, Gustavo de Mendieta. In his treatment of Cortés, Mendieta “kneels and kisses” his hand applauding him for his spiritual self-conquest.³

For the Franciscan friars, Cortés’ carefully staged reception had tremendous mystical and theological implications. With Columbus’ discovery of the “West Indies” in 1492 and Vasco da Gama’s trip round the Cape of Good Hope to India in 1499, Franciscan mysticism discovered the possibility of a Christianity which would be not only conceptually universal but territorially global in scope. Columbus and da Gama’s discoveries meant that the gospel could be brought to all parts of the world and to all men, it was no longer limited to the geographical constraints of the Old World. The realization that every person on earth could now be converted was a “vision...so blinding and so radiant that its fulfillment must inevitably foreshadow the rapidly approaching end of the world. It seemed to these

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10634-4 - Theatre in Latin America: Religion, Politics, and Culture from Cortes to the 1980s

Adam Versenyi

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Theatrical display during the Conquest*

3

mystics that after all the races of mankind had been converted nothing further could happen in this world; for anything else would be an anticlimax.”⁴ The Franciscan missionaries employed biblical exegesis to support their mystical temperament and to further their terrestrial aims. Thus the parable concerning the eleventh hour in Matthew 20, confirmed the idea that man was living in the last age of the world; and the parable concerning the three invitations to supper in Luke 14 became the theological underpinning for the Conquest. Mendieta approved of secular humanist Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda’s exegesis of Luke 14 in converting the heathen.

Sepúlveda suggested that the servant’s first invitation corresponded to the Christian Church prior to Emperor Constantine’s reign (311–337), when coercion was not employed to bring converts into the fold. The third invitation, however, corresponded to the Church during and after Constantine, when there was, for the first time, a unified Christian Empire. Such unification meant that the Church now had a secular arm which, when authorized to do so by the spiritual power, could employ force to convert the heathen.⁵ While such an exegesis afforded the Franciscans the luxury of utilizing secular power to achieve their own ends, the use of a nonecclesiastical exegesis foreshadows the mendicant orders’ inability to establish themselves in the New World without the backing of the secular authority. Such dependence was to prove the downfall of the mendicants’ enormous influence in colonial America. This was not yet the case, however, when Cortés placed himself at the feet of the twelve Franciscan friars. Their number was no accident. They had set sail quite consciously considering themselves the successors to Christ’s twelve apostles and, while Cortés had probably calmly calculated the political consequences of his actions, he displayed the religious fervor of a man of his position, time, and temperament in carrying them out.

If the Franciscan friars were surprised by Cortés’ behavior, the Aztec leaders who accompanied him must have been amazed. They saw for the first time European men dressed in coarse clothing similar to that of their own priesthood. These same men, they were soon to discover, professed to be uninterested in gold, the one constant craving of all the Europeans they had previously encountered. It was to these men that their conqueror Cortés, the man whom they had taken to be a god or a representative of the gods himself, bowed in homage. His gesture of taking the friars’ hands to his mouth and, even

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10634-4 - Theatre in Latin America: Religion, Politics, and Culture from Cortes to the 1980s

Adam Versenyi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

Cortés greets the twelve Franciscans

more so, his attempt to kiss the hems of their robes, must have astonished the Aztecs in its near repetition of the dirt-eating gesture of humility and honor with which they themselves greeted those they wished to honor. Such a gesture is continually mentioned in the chronicles when the Spaniards first encounter the Indians and can be seen represented on sculpture and other artwork of the period throughout Mesoamerica. In addition, the similarity between Cortés' welcome to the friars and Moctezoma II's welcome to Cortés a few years before must have made a deep impression upon the Aztec leaders.

SPANISH AND AZTEC THEATRICAL DISPLAY DURING
THE CONQUEST

Although Cortés did not reach the Yucatán until 1519, Moctezoma II may have known of the existence of strange ships in the Caribbean as early as 1507. He certainly received reports of their presence long before the Spaniards' approach to Tenochtitlán, and every report seemed to follow a series of evil omens the most frightening of which was a comet.⁶ The Aztecs perceived these omens as predicting doom for their empire. This heightened climate was added to the coincidence that Cortés' arrival in 1519 corresponded with the year I Reed in the Aztec calendar. This was the date when the god Quetzalcoátl had promised to return. Cortés' appearance during I Reed led the Aztecs to suspect that the Spaniards might actually be gods, possibly including Quetzalcoátl himself. As a consequence, Moctezoma had elaborate costumes of feathers and gold made and sent them via messenger to Cortés aboard his ship, where he was clothed as a god. The costumes were for Quetzalcoátl, Tlaloc, the rain god, and Tezcatlipoca, a patron of royalty. Moctezoma hoped in this way to propitiate the strange gods, causing them to reveal their identities or go away. Cortés, however, quickly realized he had been taken for a deity and took full advantage of the situation. Chaining the messengers, he fired his cannon, which caused them to faint. He then revived them with wine, which made them drunk. The messengers confused reports of Cortés' theatrical actions (costumed as a god, he assumed the role) could not have eased Moctezoma's heavy heart.⁷

After a few decisive battles, Cortés' approach upon the Aztec

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10634-4 - Theatre in Latin America: Religion, Politics, and Culture from Cortes to the 1980s

Adam Versenyi

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Spanish and Aztec theatrical display during the Conquest* 5

capital was made virtually without bloodshed. His superiority in battle was certainly not the result of numerical strength but of firepower and, more importantly, vastly different traditions of warfare. For the Aztecs warfare was a ritual activity that had been performed along certain guidelines laid down by Tlacael around 1427. At a moment of near complete defeat for the Aztecs, this singular leader, who never desired to be chief himself, transformed the Aztec nation from victims into vanquishers. He did this by reorganizing the army along strict lines of discipline, and instilling Aztec society with the sense of being a predestined people. They became a warrior–mystic race whose divine mission was to take sacrificial victims in battle.⁸

Such battle was highly ritualistic, in a format largely composed of elaborate announcements of hostilities prior to any actual fighting. When they did fight, they fought with obsidian blades, wore splendid costumes, and carried brilliant standards. Since the point was to capture prisoners for subsequent sacrifice, they avoided killing their opponents, and if their leader was slain or their standard taken, they surrendered, with both sides deciding between them the amount of tribute to be paid by the losers. So necessary to the continuance of Aztec society was human sacrifice, in fact, that in times of peace an artificial form of warfare, called “Flowery Wars,” was devised to provide the necessary victims. Under the terms of a prearranged compact, the Aztecs and their neighbors to the east agreed to meet in equal number and do battle in a specially designated area. The sole purpose of this type of warfare was to obtain victims for sacrifice. Moriarty has pointed out the similarities involved in both the ritual nature of this kind of combat and the conception of honor that accompanied it, and the medieval “Mêlée.”⁹ It is also an incipient theatrical form in which a battle is consciously staged. The difference being that this type of “performance” lacks spectators. Against this highly structured style of warfare Cortés launched a war of total conquest. It was so antithetical to the system that they had developed that the Aztecs did not know how to respond.¹⁰ After a failed attempt to ambush the Spanish in Cholula, the remaining Aztec cities quietly surrendered.

Moctezoma II and his nobles prepared an elaborate welcoming ceremony for Cortés. Meeting him at the southern entrance on the outskirts of Tenochtitlán, Moctezoma is said to have addressed Cortés as a descendant of Quetzalcoátl, saying to him: “O our lord,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10634-4 - Theatre in Latin America: Religion, Politics, and Culture from Cortes to the 1980s

Adam Versenyi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

thou hast suffered fatigue; thou hast spent thyself. Thou has arrived on earth; thou hast come to thy noble city of Mexico. Thou hast come to occupy thy noble mat and seat, which for a little time I have guarded and watched for thee.”¹¹ Although it is questionable whether or not Moctezoma believed Cortés was Quetzalcoátl returned, his adoption of the story explained his own actions, and inactions, towards the Spaniards. The similarity between his welcome of Cortés and Cortés’ welcome to the friars is striking, and it is to be assumed that Cortés consciously reinforced the similarities to impress the Aztec leaders with the Franciscans’ position. By humbling himself before the friars Cortés increased the power of the mendicant presence. At the same time, he utilized the ecclesiastical power they represented, and which he confirmed, to consolidate his secular authority over the recently conquered Aztecs.

In order to understand the Aztec response to Cortés’ carefully staged greeting to the friars, it is necessary to return to pre-Columbian times and examine the relationships between religion, politics, and theatre in indigenous society. How would the Aztecs have responded to Cortés’ piece of theatre? Would they have seen it as a staged event? Besides the easily perceived significance of their conqueror kneeling before a different authority in their presence, would the Aztecs have understood the broader religious and political implications of Cortés’ act?

RELIGION, POLITICS, AND THEATRE IN INDIGENOUS SOCIETY

To the Aztecs daily existence was a metaphysical drama based upon the interplay of space and time. In a certain limited sense, that of ritual representation such as that present in the “Flowery Wars,” a theatrical element pervaded their lives. In their language, Nahuatl, the words “movement,” “heart,” and “soul” all share a common root. The structure of the language reflected the structure of a society for which life (the heart) was impossible without movement. Such a fundamental belief led to the Aztec obsession with, and creation of, a highly evolved calendrical system.

The Nahuas ... believed that movement and life resulted from the harmony achieved by the spatial orientation of the years and the days, in other words, by the spatialization of time. So long as this harmony continued, so long as the four directions of the universe were each allotted thirteen years in every

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10634-4 - Theatre in Latin America: Religion, Politics, and Culture from Cortes to the 1980s

Adam Versenyi

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Indigenous society*

7

century and their supremacy unquestioned during the specified time, the Fifth Sun [the era current at the time of the Conquest] would continue to exist – it would continue to move. Should this balance some day be disturbed, another cosmic struggle for supremacy would be initiated. There would be one final earthquake – one so powerful that “with this we shall perish.”¹²

This understanding of the interrelationship of space and time, combined with the Aztec narratives of genesis, produced a specific orientation underlying all actions in everyday life. The narratives told of how the gods created the world out of their own blood. In so doing they themselves became dependent upon the world for their own survival. Periodic infusions of offerings of the human heart and blood were essential if the gods, and the god’s creations, were to continue to exist. This combination of forces provided a basis for Tlacacl’s creation of a trained corps of warrior–mystics devoted to their god, Huitzilopochtli.

Huitzilopochtli, a god associated with the day, was born of Coatlicue, an earth-mother goddess. Coatlicue, a priestess, was sweeping out her temple one day when she discovered a ball of down which she placed in the bosom of her dress for safekeeping. By the time she had finished sweeping the down was gone and she was miraculously pregnant. Believing themselves to be disgraced, Coatlicue’s 400 sons and her daughter Coyolxauhqui all joined together to kill their mother. As she died Huitzilopochtli swore vengeance. He appeared fully armed, chased off the 400 sons and cut off Coyolxauhqui’s head.

Modern scholarship has held that the Aztecs saw the 400 sons as representations of the 400 stars and Coyolxauhqui as a representation of the moon. Their defeat by Huitzilopochtli signified day’s victory over night. For the Aztecs this battle was reenacted every night as the sun died in the west and then, after a night of strenuous combat, was reborn in the east. Subsequent investigation has shown that Aztec symbolic representations of the sun, the moon, and the stars are attached to other situations and deities as well, and that such a neat progression from night to day is more probably a Western construct imposed upon Aztec conception. In any case, this concept of a battle between night and day was one recorded by the friars.¹³ According to such a concept sacrificial offerings of human heart and blood renewed Huitzilopochtli’s strength in his nightly war with the forces of darkness. Like their god, the Aztecs themselves became great warriors

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10634-4 - Theatre in Latin America: Religion, Politics, and Culture from Cortes to the 1980s

Adam Versenyi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

skilled at ceremonial warfare and human sacrifice. Their mission was no less than the prevention of the final catastrophe, the death of the Fifth Sun.

AZTEC RITUAL-DRAMA

Ritual warfare and sacrificial offerings are not, in and of themselves, full-blown theatre. The latter distinguishes between the audience and the performers, the former do not. Victor Turner has defined ritual as “prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to belief in invisible beings or powers regarded as the first and final causes of all effects.”¹⁴ He goes on to say that “I like to think of ritual essentially as *performance, enactment*, not primarily as rules or rubrics. The rules ‘frame’ the ritual process, but the ritual process transcends its frame.” This distinction is especially valid in regards to Latin America, where indigenous ritual forms were incorporated into the mendicant evangelical theatre. The spectacle inherent in Aztec ritual warfare and sacrifice contained within it many elements of an incipient theatre the mendicant orders skillfully used to their advantage as they undertook the task of Christianizing the New World. The rules framed the ritual process and the ritual process transcended its frame, but the context had changed.

Dominican and Augustinian mendicant forces followed the Franciscan shock troops into the battle for the indigenous populations’ souls and it is to a Dominican, Fray Diego Durán (c. 1537–1588) that we owe our gratitude for his descriptions of Aztec ritual representations in his *Historia de las Indias*. Durán was brought to Mexico at the age of five or six, and his upbringing in the New World gave him a particularly astute understanding of the meaning of sacrifice. Two ritual representations of special interest to this study that were observed by Durán are those done for Huitzilopochtli and Quetzalcoátl:

The dance they liked best was that done with adornments of flowers with which they crowned and surrounded each other. For this dance they built a house of roses in the principal *momoztli* of their great god Huitzilopochtli’s temple, and constructed a few handmade trees, filled with sweet-smelling flowers, where the goddess Xochiquétzal was made to sit. While they danced, a few boys dressed like birds, and others dressed like butterflies, heavily adorned with rich plumes of green, blue, red, and yellow descended.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10634-4 - Theatre in Latin America: Religion, Politics, and Culture from Cortes to the 1980s

Adam Versenyi

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Aztec ritual-drama*

9

They climbed the trees, running from branch to branch, sucking the dew from the roses.

Then the gods, each one dressed in all their adornments as if they had stepped off the altar, appeared. They dressed the Indians in the same fashion and then, their blow-guns in hand, began to shoot at the make believe little birds in the trees. From there the goddess of the roses, who was Xochiquétzal, came out to receive them, taking them by the hand and making them sit down next to her, treating them with great honor and respect as such gods deserved. There she gave them roses and incense, calling her representatives and making them comfort them. This was the solemnest dance this nation had, and thus there are very few times now that I see another danced without wonder.¹⁵

As Fernando Horcasitas has noted, it is difficult to imagine this scene as a hieratic dumbshow. It seems logical to assume that the dance was accompanied by song, music, and dialog, especially between Xochiquétzal and the other gods.¹⁶ In any case, the description presents us with a ritual dance of a theatrical nature in which boys play the roles of birds and butterflies and adults represent the individual gods complete with their identifying clothing and insignia, and sets are elaborately constructed. It is only a short historical step from here to the type of schematic, allegorical representation present in the medieval cycle plays, and from there to a more developed form of characterization. Even more striking in its elaborate preparation and religious content was the annual festival for Quetzalcoátl (Cortés' first indigenous costume) described by Durán.

Forty days prior to the most important day of the festival, the merchants bought a slave who would represent Quetzalcoátl during those forty days. He had to be "healthy of hands and feet, without any blemish or brand, neither one-eyed, nor cloudy eyed, neither one-legged nor one-handed, nor deformed; not bleary-eyed, drooling, or toothless, without any sign of boils, pustules, or scrofula. In all, that he should be clean of any stain."¹⁷ He had to be, in other words, a perfect example of the ancient Mexican man. Once he was purchased, the slave was bathed and:

[They] dressed him exactly like the idol was dressed, placing the crown and the bird's beak upon his head, giving him the mantle, the jewel, the stockings and gold earrings, the loincloth, buckler, and scythe that pertained to the idol.

This man was the living representation of the idol for those forty days. He was served and worshipped like the idol, and his own guard and many other people accompanied him every day.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10634-4 - Theatre in Latin America: Religion, Politics, and Culture from Cortes to the 1980s

Adam Versenyi

Excerpt

[More information](#)

They also kept him caged at night so that he wouldn't flee, as has already been noted about the slave who represented Tezcatlipoca. Then, each morning, he was taken from the cage, placed in a prominent spot and served an excellent meal. After he had eaten, they put roses in his hands and garlands of roses around his neck and went with him to the city. He sang and danced throughout the city so as to be recognized as the likeness of the god...

And hearing him approach singing, the women and children emerged from their houses to greet him and offer him many things fit for a god...

Nine days before the appointed day of the festival, there came before him two of the oldest and most venerated temple dignitaries who, humbling themselves before him, with great reverences said to him in a respectful, hushed voice, "Lord, your majesty should know that nine days from now your labor of singing and dancing will be at an end and you must die." To which he had to respond that the time was right. If the priests noticed that the slave was upset or saddened by his impending death, he was drugged with *itzpacalatl*, a potion that made him forget his destiny and he was soon dancing and singing again.

When the day arrived which, as we have said, was midnight on the third of February, after having done homage to him with music and incense, the slave was taken and sacrificed. At the appointed hour his heart was offered to the moon and he was then thrown in front of the idol, in whose presence they killed him, letting the body fall down the steps.¹⁸

These two rituals were described by Durán two generations after the Conquest, when the indigenous ruling class had been quite thoroughly suppressed. As related to him by the Indians with whom he came into contact, such spectacles as those of Huitzilopochtli and Quetzalcoátl are remarkable for the theatrical display involved. All the elements that we normally associated with a more fully developed theatre were present in this indigenous ritual-drama: representational actors, spectators, a defined stage, and a thematic content developed and carried to conclusion, dialog, music, and dance. Such drama, moreover, was an important part of the culture's social, religious, and political life. When the slave-as-Quetzalcoátl's heart was offered in sacrifice and his blood shed, not only was the god's sacrifice for his Aztec brethren reenacted, but the human slave's blood served to propitiate and strengthen the god himself, thereby maintaining equilibrium in the universe and the stability of the Fifth Sun. Such duality, as we have seen, was essential to the successful completion of the festival.

The festival of Quetzalcoátl presents us with a type of experience, the sacred rite, that the modern theatre has explored from Artaud to