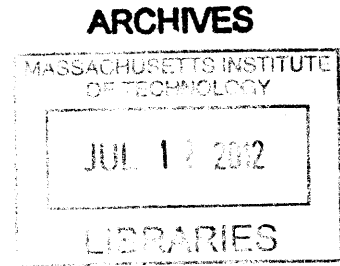


Between Gods and Men: Analyzing the Aztec Deification of the Spanish
Conquistadores and Reassessing Its Significance

by

Alexandria C. Hall



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Signature of Author

Handwritten signature of Alexandria C. Hall in black ink.

Department of History
May 18, 2012

Certified by

Handwritten signature of Anne E.C. McCants in black ink.

Anne E.C. McCants
Professor of History and Head, History Section
MacVicar Faculty Fellow
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by

Handwritten signature of Anne E.C. McCants in black ink.

Anne E.C. McCants
Professor of History and Head, History Section
MacVicar Faculty Fellow

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ABSTRACT

Immediately following the Spanish Conquest of Mexico in 1521, accounts arose claiming the Aztecs believed the Spaniards to be gods. This tale of Spanish deification has sparked heated debate among scholars for centuries as they have been asking, “Did the Aztecs truly believe the Spaniards to be gods?” This question naturally results in two lines of argument, those who think the Aztecs did believe the Spaniards to be gods and those that do not. The scholars arguing for the Aztec deification of the Spaniards rely on known Aztec beliefs, the importance of time to the Aztecs, and the historical works that clearly state the Aztecs thought the Spaniards to be divine. The scholars against this argument instead argue the Spaniards created this account of European apotheosis, based on historical precedents and strikingly similar accounts of European apotheosis after the Spanish Conquest of Mexico. Both of these arguments are not, however, free of criticism, revealing the inability to ever answer this question decisively. Instead, this intriguing narrative of the conquest should be reassessed using new questions that could provide new insight on the relations of Spaniards and their conquered subjects, on cultural clashes more generally, and on historical work and interests over time.

Thesis Supervisor: Anne E.C. McCants

Title: Professor of History and Head, History Section

*To my parents,
For supporting anything I decide to do*

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I. Introduction

In 1519, Hernán Cortés led eleven ships from Cuba to the Mexican mainland intent on colonizing the land for the Spanish crown. To say Cortés and his 500 accompanying *conquistadores* were impressed by the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán, would be a vast understatement:

“I cannot describe one hundredth part of all the things which could be mentioned, but, as best I can, I will describe some of those I have seen which, although badly described, will, I well know, be so remarkable as not to be believed, for we who saw them with our own eyes could not grasp them with our understanding...[t]his great city of Texmititan (Tenochtitlán) is built on the salt lake, and no matter by what road you travel there are two leagues from the main body of the city to the mainland. There are four artificial causeways leading to it, and each is as wide as two cavalry lances. The city itself is as big as Seville or Córdoba....There is also one square twice as big as that of Salamanca...and the most important of these towers is higher than that of the cathedral of Seville.”¹ -- Hernán Cortés

The Spaniards had happened upon a highly developed society, one whose architectural masterpieces rivaled the greatest cities of Spain, or even of the whole of Europe. The awesome works of the Aztec Empire left Cortés speechless.

But the Spanish *conquistadores* were further shocked by the perceived “primitive” aspects of Aztec culture that coexisted with the Aztecs’ urban achievements. All aspects of Aztec culture were intertwined with their religious beliefs and practices including the worship of idols, autosacrifice (self-cutting to sacrifice blood to the gods), and human sacrifices conducted at the Great Temple of Tenochtitlán. It was these religious customs, not their technological development or urban grandeur, that ultimately defined the Aztecs in the eyes of the Spaniards.

¹ Hernán Cortés, *Letters From Mexico*, trans. Anthony Pagden (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 101-105.

Appalled by the Aztecs' religious practices, the Spaniards pursued a violent course of action, intent on conquering the capital city of the Aztec Empire before further colonizing the Valley of Mexico. With the essential support of indigenous warriors, who hailed from other Mexican cities and resented the primacy of Tenochtitlán, Cortés attained victory over the Aztec capital within a year of the Spanish arrival.

These interactions alone between the Spaniards and Aztecs make for fascinating study, but further intriguing aspects of the encounter arose after the Spanish Conquest of Mexico. One legend of the conquest has attracted particular attention, encouraging interpretation and debate throughout the last 500 years. This account attributes the Spaniards' success not to their advanced military technology or their strength in numbers (assisted as they were by indigenous allies) but to the Aztecs' debilitating perception of the newcomers as deities. Beginning with the work of the Spanish court historian Francisco López de Gómara in 1552, the Aztecs were characterized as fearful of the great Spanish "gods," with Moctezuma "quoted" as saying,

"I begged you heretofore not to come here, it was because my people were afraid of you, for you frightened them with you wild beards, and brought animals that swallow men, and because, since you came from heaven, could call down the lightning and thunder, making the earth tremble, striking down him who displeased you, or whomever you pleased."²

Though Gómara himself never traveled to Mexico and his work was discredited by the subsequent firsthand account that Bernal Díaz de Castillo finished writing in 1568, the story of the Aztecs' deification of the Spaniards managed to gain considerable traction. This account of the conquest appeared in a number of Nahuatl language texts, seemingly validating Gómara's claims. This legend remains an interesting and perplexing part of the history of the Spanish

² Francisco López de Gómara, *Cortés: The Life of the Conqueror by His Secretary*, trans. Lesley Byrd Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 141.

Conquest of Mexico precisely because of these inconsistencies within the historical record. This tale begs the question, “Did the Aztecs really believe the Spaniards were gods?,” a question that has resulted in two opposite answers in the scholarly literature.

One group of scholars has concluded that the Aztecs truly believed the Spaniards to be gods, pointing to the Aztecs’ religious beliefs as the primary evidence. One Aztec myth, supposedly dating to the pre-Conquest period, tells of a great king, an *hombre-dios* or “man-god,” who left Mexico and promised to return; this “man-god” has been linked to the arrival of Hernán Cortés and his men. The Aztecs, who place a great deal of stock in time and the symbolic meaning of years, had predicted a set time of return for this *hombre-dios*, and Cortés happened to arrive exactly at the prophesied time of the mythological king’s return, further convincing the Aztecs of Cortés’s divinity.

Another group of scholars argues that the myth of Spanish deification is just that, a myth, constructed by European minds to justify the Spaniards’ brutal conquest of the Mexican natives. The Roman and Christian ancestry of the Spaniards provide evidence of tales of deification long before the Spanish Conquest of Mexico. Strikingly similar tales of European apotheosis arose in Peru, where the Spaniards overtook the Incan Empire, as well as in Hawaii in the eighteenth century. The historical precedent and similar subsequent narratives suggest that the Spanish *conquistadores* fabricated the story of their apotheosis.

This work will expound upon both of these arguments, but with the purpose of proving that a simple “yes or no” answer to the question is unattainable. While one may be able to find a rationale for the tale of Spanish deification in Aztec religion, many factors render this argument moot. There is a severe lack of pre-Conquest records of Aztec beliefs, with those few existing

only as pictographs, contributing greatly to the difficulties of interpretations. It is also possible for alterations and biases to be present in post-Conquest works on Aztec religion due to the heightened Spanish presence throughout Mexico. The myth can be alternately interpreted as a purely European construct through analysis of historical precedents and ensuing similar situations, but there is nothing totally prohibiting the Aztec-Spaniard interaction from occurring as the worshipper-deity dichotomy found in some records. In sum, posing the question, “Did the Aztecs truly believe the Spaniards to be gods?,” and seeking a decisive answer is both impossible and futile.

I propose that instead of asking “Did the Aztecs truly believe the Spaniards to be gods?,” a question that cannot be precisely answered, historians should question the implications of such an account for both societies. Instead of analyzing the origins of the myth of Spanish deification, one should instead appreciate that this story exists, and ask new questions regarding its significance to both the Spanish and indigenous societies after the conquest. For example, what role, if any, did this tale play in the ensuing global expeditions of the Spaniards? What effect would such a tale have on the conquered indigenous peoples, on their view of themselves and their ancestors, and their future development? Indeed, further analysis of the Spanish deification narrative could provide enlightening information on how two very different cultures interact generally, revealing patterns that accompany any clash of cultures. These questions and others will be examined in greater detail at the close of this work, as these are the questions that can be answered, the ones that can produce new insights across many disciplines.

The Aztecs’ deification of the Spaniards does offer a powerful explanation for the fall of Tenochtitlán. The religious origins of the tale excuse the Aztecs of military inadequacy, resolving

them of any blame for their loss. Furthermore, the myth's distinctly non-Christian aspects encouraged the Spaniards to convert and save the Aztecs from their heathen beliefs. The legend immortalizes the victory of a relatively small band of Spaniards over a vast and advanced empire. This epic account defines the events of 1519 in Mexico, and yet remains vastly unexplored.

II. “Where would they come from but from the heavens?”³

“The [Aztecs’] paralyzing belief that the Spaniards are gods”⁴ is often cited as the primary reason for the defeat of the vast Aztec Empire. It is the swiftest explanation for how a band of only 500 Spaniards could have invaded and toppled the empire’s capital in a matter of months. The records dating to immediately after the Spanish Conquest of Mexico, specifically the native-informed works compiled by Fray Toribio de Benavente Motolinía and Bernardino de Sahagún, relate a tale of Moctezuma, the emperor of the Aztec Empire, first making the connection between the Spanish general Hernán Cortés and the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl. This belief then led Moctezuma to welcome Cortés and his men and allow them unhindered access to the capital city of Tenochtitlán, from whence the Spaniards could then have launched a campaign from behind enemy lines. The known religious and historical beliefs of the Aztecs, two inextricably intertwined concepts in that culture, encouraged this interpretation and have continued to perpetuate this theory of the Spaniards’ victory to the present era.

This chapter will detail the indigenous records from both the pre- and post-Conquest periods, revealing the Aztecs as the source of the myth of Spanish deification. The ensuing account of the central Aztec beliefs will reveal the sacred basis of the apotheosis of the Spaniards. This chapter will end, though, on a critical note, questioning the validity of these records as “proof” that the Aztecs believed the Spaniards to be gods, as the presence of bias in the historical sources and broken historical records cannot be ignored.

³ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 95.

⁴ Todorov, *Conquest of America*, 75.

A. Motolinía and Sahagún's Accounts

Following the Spanish Conquest of Mexico, twelve Franciscan friars emigrated to New Spain, intent on establishing the Christian faith in the newly conquered lands. Two of those original twelve friars, Fray Toribio de Benavente Motolinía and Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, dedicated much of their time to recording the history and beliefs of the indigenous peoples, providing important indigenous perspectives on the events of the conquest. Fray Toribio de Benavente, who took the Nahuatl word Motolinía (meaning “poor”) as his name, began writing his *History of the Indians of New Spain* in 1536, but his work remained unpublished until 1858.⁵ Motolinía's main purpose in writing was to detail the conversion of the Nahuas to Christianity, though he does briefly recount the Spaniards' arrival in Mexico as part of his narrative:

The year in which the Spaniards came and entered this land was noted particularly by these Indians in the accounts of their years as a very remarkable thing which at first caused them great fear and wonder. They were astounded to see a people come over the water--which they had never seen and never heard it was possible--in a dress so different from theirs, so intrepid and courageous, such a small number entering all the provinces of this land with such authority and boldness, as if all the natives were their vassals. They were also filled with wonder and astonishment to see the horses and what the Spaniards did when mounted on them; some of them thought that men and horses were all one, although this was only at the beginning in the first towns, for afterwards they realized that the man had a separate existence and the horse was an animal, for people observe and notice things....They called the Spaniards *teteuh*, which means “gods,” and the Spaniards corrupting the word, said *teules*. This name was used for more than three years, until we gave the Indians to understand that there was only one God and that they should call the Spaniards Christians.⁶

Motolinía importantly notes the enduring Nahua term for the Spaniards, *teteuh* or “gods,” information he obtained from Nahua pictographs and the memories of Nahua elders.

⁵ Toribio de Benavente Motolinía, *Motolinía's History of the Indians of New Spain*, trans. Elizabeth Andros Foster (Berkeley: Cortés Society, 1950), 2-20.

⁶ Motolinía, *Indians of New Spain*, 169-70

Interestingly, the Spaniards eventually corrected the Nahuas' misunderstanding, leading one to wonder if the *conquistadores* reveled in their deification until it was no longer socially acceptable with the spread of Christianity. While in Motolinía's account the Nahuas did not predict the arrival of the Spaniards, as was the claim in other accounts linking Hernán Cortés and Quetzalcoatl, they still believed the Spaniards to be gods, even after the fall of the city of Tenochtitlán.

The most complete account of the Cortés-Quetzalcoatl connection appears in Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's Book Twelve of the Florentine Codex, which recounts the Spanish Conquest of Mexico in both Nahuatl and Spanish.⁷ The Florentine Codex is the best preserved copy of Sahagún's *General History of the Things of New Spain*, documenting the religious beliefs and practices, political and economic organization, and history of the Aztecs, including those relating to the Spanish Conquest of Mexico. With the aid of Nahua students, Book Twelve was first recorded in Nahuatl, and Sahagún himself later translated the work into Spanish, attempting to maintain the accuracy of the accounts. Sahagún's account begins before the arrival of Cortés, detailing the ominous signs the Aztecs witnessed ten years before the Spaniards landed in Mexico. The first Aztecs who encountered a Spanish ship (not part of Cortés's fleet) regarded the Europeans as representatives of Quetzalcoatl, making "the earheating gesture" in the Nahuatl version, a praying ritual to the gods, and "kiss[ing] the prows of the canoes as a sign of worship."⁸ "[T]hey thought it was Quetzalcoatl Topiltzin who had come to arrive."⁹ Sahagún and

⁷ See full translation in James Lockhart, *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico* (London: University of California Press, 1993).

⁸ Lockhart, "Book Twelve of the Florentine Codex," in *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico*. Includes the Nahuatl and Spanish versions of the text, and an English translation by Lockhart for each. These quotes are from pages 58 and 59, respectively.

⁹ Lockhart, *We People Here*, 58.

his scribes note that the people of the Aztec empire had been expecting the return of Quetzalcoatl, who had gone into exile after being tricked into betraying his people by Tezcatlipoca, another important Aztec deity, and promised to return.¹⁰ The next ship that arrived and landed in Mexico was that of Hernán Cortés, and it is stated in the Florentine Codex that Moctezuma immediately believed that this ship was led by Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, the earthly manifestation of the god Quetzalcoatl. Believing this, he sent Cortés a large corpus of goods corresponding to the most powerful deities in the Aztec pantheon.¹¹ From the first moments of Cortés's interactions with the Aztecs, he was regarded as Quetzalcoatl. Both Motolinía and Sahagún, European writers utilizing Nahuatl sources for their works, express an immediate Aztec belief in the Spaniards as gods.

B. Nahuatl Accounts of the Spanish Conquest of Mexico

A series of annals, codices, and songs composed in the Nahuatl language after the conquest provide an Aztec perspective of the fall of Tenochtitlán. James Lockhart is a contemporary scholar who has translated and organized many Nahuatl-language works into one volume, *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico*, which includes a number of perspectives on the events surrounding the conquest. The Annals of Tlatelolco, composed in the 1550s and 1560s, describe these events from the perspective of Tenochtitlán's neighboring city. The Annals describe the April 1520 incident in which Cortés had to leave Tenochtitlán in order to confront another group of Spaniards who had landed on the Mexican coast. Cortés left

¹⁰ David Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 30. Also included in the Lockhart, "Book Twelve of the Florentine Codex," in *We People Here*, 59.

¹¹ Lockhart, "Book Twelve of the Florentine Codex," in *We People Here*, 62-69 (even pages contain the Nahuatl translation, odd pages contain the corresponding Spanish translation).

Pedro de Alvarado, one of the high ranking *conquistadores* in his troupe, and a small band of soldiers in Tenochtitlán while he left to confront Velásquez's men. Interestingly, the Annals refer to Pedro de Alvarado as Tonatiuh, the name of the Sun God, due to his vicious massacre of the Tenochca people during Cortés's absence.¹² Later, when Cortés and his whole group returned to Tenochtitlán following the *noche triste*,¹³ the document quotes the Itzpan people, also of the Valley of Mexico, as saying, "the god, the Captain is summoning" the Tlaxcalans to battle, referring to Cortés as *teotl*.¹⁴ The Annals also state that when Cortés invited the Tlatelolca back to their city following the defeat of the Aztecs in Tenochtitlán, they were prohibited from resettling Tenochtitlán because "it is the conquered area of the gods and is already their home."¹⁵

Lockhart's collection also includes extracts from the Codex Aubin, a work written in Nahuatl by a Tenochca, an inhabitant of Tenochtitlán, in the 1560s. The material is disjointed and does not follow an exact pattern, suggesting that the document is untouched and unedited, an authentic version of the Tenochca oral tradition.¹⁶ The document, though written from a Christianized point of view, makes note of "the Sun," Tonatiuh, remaining in Tenochtitlán during Cortés's departure, referring to Pedro de Alvarado only by his corresponding Aztec god.¹⁷

¹² Lockhart, "Annals of Tlatelolco," in *We People Here*, 257.

¹³ This is the event in which the Tenochca people attacked the Spaniards and expelled them from the city. Many Spaniards perished, and all others were injured. The name is obviously of Spanish origin, and am not aware of a Nahuatl alternate. The lack of emphasis on this event may be because the Tenochca no longer regarded the Spanish as a threat following their expulsion from the city, and therefore did not regard the event as importantly as the Spaniards.

¹⁴ Lockhart, "Annals of Tlatelolco," in *We People Here*, 265.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 271.

¹⁶ Lockhart, *We People Here*, 43.

¹⁷ Lockhart, "Codex Aubin," in *We People Here*, 275.

Another Nahuatl perspective on the Spanish Conquest of Mexico appears in the Annals of Quauhtitlan, written in 1570 in a city near Tenochtitlán within the Valley of Mexico. It occasionally mentions the people of Tenochtitlán, and states that “they [the Aztecs] regarded them [the Spaniards] as gods; later they called them Christians.”¹⁸ Interestingly, this later document does not specifically equate the Spanish *conquistadores* with Aztec deities, instead noting that the Tenochca adjusted their perception of Spaniards, much as is recorded in Motolinía’s work. However, this may be explained by the distance of Quauhtitlan from the action of Tenochtitlán, and therefore does not provide the most detailed information regarding the Tenochca’s interactions with the Spaniards. Each of the Nahuatl documents written decades after the Conquest refer to the Spaniards as deities.

Nahuatl songs, also recorded from the middle of the sixteenth century and beyond, provide details of the Spanish Conquest of Mexico. John Bierhorst, another contemporary Nahuatl scholar, has provided an English translation of the *Cantares Mexicanos*, a sixteenth-century compilation of Nahuatl songs and poems. The dating of the songs is imprecise, but the content suggests that the majority of the 91 songs included in the manuscript are of the post-Conquest period. One of the pertinent songs, titled “Water-pouring song” and labelled as folio 56 in Bierhorst’s book, details the events of the conquest from the Aztec point of view. It recounts that Moctezuma greeted Cortés in the following manner:

“When the Captain arrived in Mexico and Montezuma went out to meet him, then he got down from his horse; and he adorned him with a gold necklace, spoke to him, and embraced him.... And right away he says to him, ‘You’ve wearied yourself in reaching *your* city, this Mexico. You’ve come to govern *your* mat and

¹⁸ Lockhart, “Annals of Quauhtitlan,” in *We People Here*, 281.

your seat. For but a moment and a day I have tended things for you. Poor is your vassal.”(my emphasis)¹⁹

The song clearly states Moctezuma believed that Cortés was some sort of returning lord, though Moctezuma did not specifically link Cortés with Quetzalcoatl. Throughout the post-Conquest period, the Nahuatl sources made a consistent connection between the Spaniards and Aztec gods, suggesting the Aztecs as the original source of the tale of Spanish deification. This plausibility of this explanation will be detailed more fully below.

B. Aztec Religious and Historical Beliefs

The myth of the Aztecs’ deification of the Spaniards centers on the identification of Hernán Cortés with the Aztec deity Quetzalcoatl. Quetzalcoatl is one of the four sons of the Aztec high god, Omoteotl. Quetzalcoatl was often represented in Aztec pictographs as a feathered serpent, associated with the feathers of the quetzal bird.²⁰ He was also considered the boundary marker between the sky and earth, most likely based on an Aztec creation myth involving Quetzalcoatl.²¹ This deity is also linked to the *hombre-dios*, “man-god,” Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, whose mythology presents the strongest links between Cortés, his *conquistadores* and Aztec religious and historical beliefs.

Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl was a mythical model priest-king who ruled over the kingdom of Tollan. The mythology states that he was born miraculously in the year 1 Reed (*Ce acatl*). Importantly, scholars have calculated the year of the Spaniards’ arrival, 1519, to correlate with

¹⁹ John Bierhorst, trans., *Cantares Mexicanos: Songs of the Aztecs* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), 329.

²⁰ Camilla Townsend, “Burying the White Gods: new Perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico,” *The American Historical Review* vol. 108, no. 3 (2003): 670.

²¹ Townsend, “Burying the White Gods,” 670 and Burr Brundage Cartwright, *The Fifth Sun: Aztec Gods, Aztec Worlds* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 31.

the Aztec year 1 Reed, providing a convincing link between the Spaniards and Quetzalcoatl. The birth of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl was miraculous, much as in the Biblical narrative of the virgin birth of Jesus. Also like the mortal representation of Jesus, Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl trained for a religious life, with his personal ritual practices considered the origins of the Aztec rituals of the sixteenth century. He was also an acclaimed warrior, and his sacrifices of defeated warriors were again considered the basis for sixteenth-century Aztec practice. Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl was the ideal sovereign of the ideal city, providing a powerful model for succeeding Aztec rulers.

At one point in his reign, however, Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl renounced human sacrifice, earning the ire of the god Tezcatlipoca. The priests of Tezcatlipoca forced Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl to drink pulque, an alcoholic beverage, and in his altered state of mind he slept with his sister. This violation of his priestly orders forced him to abdicate his throne and go into exile.²² According to the Florentine Codex, compiled by Sahagún, Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl then sailed off to the East, also in the year 1 Reed, and promised to return one day. David Carrasco states that Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl specifically promised “a bearded people will eventually rule the land.”²³

The Aztecs of Tenochtitlán traced their origins back to the great kingdom of the Toltecs in Tollan in order to legitimate their claims of empire, and therefore traced their ancestry back to the great priest-king Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl. With the arrival of foreign looking and bearded persons, sailing in from the East in the year 1 Reed, it has been argued by scholars like Carrasco that the Spaniards were easily linked to the promised return of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl. According to the Annals of Cuauhtitlan (also spelled Quauhtitlan), the return time of Quetzalcoatl had different results: “if he [Quetzalcoatl] comes on 1 Crocodile he strikes the old men, the old

²² Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl*, 175-178.

²³ *Ibid.*, 30.

women, all whomever. If on 1 Jaguar, if on 1 Deer, if on 1 Flower, he strikes the children. And if on 1 Reed, he strikes at kings.”²⁴ This tale of Quetzalcoatl, linked with the arrival time of the Spaniards, seemingly predicts the fall of Tenochtitlán. Interestingly, Dominican, Augustinian, and Jesuit friars of the colonial period in Mexico all hypothesized that Quetzalcoatl was a preacher of the Christian gospel, creating an even more complicated relationship between the European invaders and the beliefs of the indigenous peoples.

While connections can be made between the departure of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl and the arrival of Hernán Cortés, it is the exact timing of Cortés’s arrival that would have been the most convincing to the natives observing the events. To the Aztecs, time was cyclical and each day, month, and year of each cycle possessed some specific significance. The mythological history of the Aztec world is first divided into ages or “Suns,” each of which had been ruled over by a specific deity. The Aztecs of the sixteenth century believed they were inhabiting the Fifth Sun, ruled over by Tonatiuh, the god inhabiting the celestial sun. A Sun could only end after a cycle of 52 years, known as a “bundle of years,” though there was an indeterminate number of these bundles in each Sun. The end of a 52-year cycle was marked by the New Fire Ceremony, which both ushered in the new year and new cycle as well as prepared the Aztecs for the potential end of their world. Both a number between one and thirteen as well as one of four signs, Rabbit, Reed, (Flint) Knife, or House, differentiate the years within a 52-year bundle. Each of these signs was related to a direction: Rabbit corresponded with the South, Reed to the East, Knife to the North, and House to the West.²⁵ The arrival of the Spaniards in 1 Reed would be particularly convincing because of their arrival from the East, the direction associated with Reed years. Other

²⁴ Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl*, 148.

²⁵ Cartwright, *Fifth Sun*, 21-22.

scholars have suggested the arrival of the Spaniards correlates to the end of a 52-year cycle, and that the new Sixth Sun was ushered in by the Spaniards' conquest of the Aztecs.

Quetzalcoatl also played an important role in the Aztec conception of time. Burr Cartwright Brundage notes the appearance of Quetzalcoatl in three of the four major Aztec creation myths. In the first, Quetzalcoatl allies with his brother deity, Tezcatlipoca, to engage in battle with, and then cut in half, the divine being Cipactli, possibly creating the separate sky and earth. Another myth states the high god Ometeotl assigned the creation of the world to those same two brother deities. The third myth involving Quetzalcoatl assigns the creation of all mankind to him and the other major deities.²⁶ Historian Inga Clendinnen notes that the inhabitants of the Fifth Sun, humans, were created thanks to the hard work of Quetzalcoatl, as he had to retrieve and protect the bones of humans, and then he and the other gods donated their own blood to create humans.²⁷ This gift of the gods created a debtor relationship between mortals and the Aztec deities, resulting in the prominence of human and autosacrifice in Aztec ritual.²⁸ Throughout this variety of creation myths, Quetzalcoatl consistently plays an essential role in the creation of the Fifth Sun, the era of the Aztecs. Quetzalcoatl therefore played an integral role in the Aztecs' perception and beliefs regarding history and time; as such, the coincidental arrival of Hernán Cortés with the year of Quetzalcoatl could not be ignored by the Aztecs.

²⁶ Cartwright, *Fifth Sun*, 30-35.

²⁷ Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 173.

²⁸ David Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmology and Ceremonial Centers* (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1990), 49.

C. Arguments Against the Aztec Invention of the Myth

Clearly, many aspects of Aztec culture suggest a link between Hernán Cortés and Quetzalcoatl, including the Aztec tale of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl and the Aztecs' perception and beliefs about the nature of history and time. However, the primary sources should be analyzed critically, as all written records about this case are themselves a byproduct of the Spaniards' invasion. It is also difficult to translate, let alone interpret, the Aztecs' pictographs and their Nahuatl language, resulting in further uncertainty about the veracity of the claim that the Aztecs believed Cortés to be the returned Quetzalcoatl. The rest of this chapter will address these problems, critically evaluating the primary sources on Aztec life.

While the Aztecs did possess a writing system, it was based on ideographs and pictographs, which are quite open to varying interpretations, by Spanish *conquistadores* as well as modern scholars. Pictographs depicted the Aztec deities and other mythic figures, but only the observer developed the story. Therefore, the stories associated with the pictographs could have vastly different details based on who interpreted the images, and this problem of multiple interpretations held true even across a spectrum of Aztec viewers. There is also no precise reading order for Aztec pictographs, making numerous different readings possible.²⁹ Aztec codices primarily served as an outline of a legend rather than a complete book, requiring oral traditions to fill in the entire story.³⁰ Unfortunately, not many Aztec writing samples from before or during the period of the Spanish Conquest of Mexico have survived, resulting in a severe underrepresentation of the indigenous perspective on their own religious and historical beliefs.

²⁹ Elizabeth Hill Boone and Walter D. Mignolo, eds., *Writing Without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica and the Andes* (London: Duke University Press, 1994), 19.

³⁰ Michael Smith, *The Aztecs* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2003), 243.

It was common practice among the Amerindians for one group to impose their language on another city or other group of people following a conquest. Therefore, it was not considered unusual for the Spaniards to press their language upon the native peoples, or for the Nahuas to adopt it.³¹ The historical materials that relate to the Spanish Conquest of Mexico were therefore recorded in Spanish, or in a Spanish-inspired written form of Nahuatl, the Aztec language. The Spanish method of phonetic writing was imposed on the conquered Aztecs along with the Spanish language. This form of writing was a novel tool for record keeping to the Nahuas and therefore required Spanish oversight to master. This European source of phonetic writing necessarily created a biased representation of both the events of the Spanish Conquest of Mexico and the historical and religious beliefs of the Aztecs. Moreover, many of the historical records pertaining to the conquest were composed long after the events, and may therefore contain exaggerations or simple fallacies that do not accurately depict the parties and events of the conquest. All these possibilities must be taken into account when analyzing the historical record of the conquest, and each casts doubt on the reliability of the claim that the Aztecs believed the Spaniards to be gods.

The works of Fray Toribio de Benavente Motolinía and Bernardino de Sahagún are both unique in their attempt to focus on the indigenous perspective of the Spaniards' conquest of Mexico and their religious and historical beliefs. Motolinía was one of the first twelve Franciscan friars to travel to Mexico after the Spanish conquest, and compiled his work between 1536 and 1540 after spending some time in Mexico studying its inhabitants. Sahagún, also among the first missionaries in Mexico, is often lauded as the first anthropologist for his work on

³¹ Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 32.

the Florentine Codex. He employed native informants, translators, and scribes to capture the Aztecs' pre-Christian beliefs and their perspective on the events of the conquest. However, neither of these works can be read without taking stock of the potential biases of the authors.

Motolinía compiled his *History of the Indians of New Spain* to highlight the humanity of the Nahuas and vouch for their eagerness to adopt Spanish customs. This work was designed then to encourage the Spanish monarchs to continue providing resources to the Franciscan mission so that they might convert all the Nahuas. The friars also hoped to prevent mistreatment of the native peoples by the *encomenderos*, the Spaniards who controlled the landed estates of New Spain. Their language was meant to encourage support and protection for the Nahuas by the Spanish monarchs, portraying the natives as loyal and earnest Christian members of the Spanish empire. Motolinía's work has an agenda, one with eyes on the future treatment of the Nahuas rather than a primary concern with the true details of the Aztec past.

Motolinía's reference to the Aztec belief in the Spaniards as gods primarily serves as an apologetic excuse for the Aztecs' actions during the Conquest, especially the *noche triste* that saw many Spaniards killed. Motolinía argued that the Aztecs were simply too innocent and uncivilized to understand the full gravity of the Spaniards' arrival. The Aztecs at the time of the conquest are portrayed as too naive to recognize the Spaniards' humanity, and their religious reverence led to their violent reaction as manifested in the *noche triste*. In contrast, the Nahuas who now lived under Spanish rule were far more educated and more Christian, and deserving of the same protections as the *encomenderos*.³² Motolinía's aim, to portray the native peoples who were his contemporaries in an innocent and wholesome light, suggests that he may have

³² Motolinía, *Indians of New Spain*, 24-25 (regarding naivety) and 34 (regarding Christianization); also Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 113.

fabricated or embellished the details of the myth of Spanish deification to support his own argument.

Sahagún's work, *The General History of the Things in New Spain*, possesses greater authenticity because it includes both Spanish and Nahuatl versions of the text. Sahagún recruited students from the Franciscan college he helped to found in Tlatelolco, the sister city of Tenochtitlán, to aid him in recording the information gathered in interviews with Nahua elders.³³ While including indigenous peoples in the compilation of this work was clearly a novel step, it is important to note that these were students of the Franciscan college, established and administered by Spaniards. The Spanish administration of the college therefore inculcate in those students very different perspectives than those of their fellow Nahuas who did not attend the college, and an especially different perspective from the Aztecs of the pre-Conquest age. Sahagún's Spanish version was translated from the Nahuatl, and while he attempted to maintain the accuracy of the Nahuatl accounts, his translation of Nahuatl was imprecise, as many words in Nahuatl had multiple meanings and/or did not have direct equivalents in Spanish.

One of the key Nahuatl words that presents such a translation problem is *teotl*, one of the terms applied to the Spaniards in the historical records. Many Spanish and English translations equate this word strictly with "god" or "deity," but this term does not have an exact translation in these languages. Camilla Townsend, a modern scholar who is highly skeptical of the Aztec belief in the Spaniards as gods, notes that *teotl* can also be more generally translated as "powerful one" or "deity impersonator," not necessarily an actual god. Michael Smith, another modern scholar, also questions this use of *teotl*, stating "this [word] is a complex and multifaceted concept that

³³ See full translation of the Florentine Codex in Lockhart, *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico* or Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, trans. Charles Dibble (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1975).

does not fit well with modern preconceptions of ancient polytheistic religion.”³⁴ As a result, directly translating *teotl* as “god” is an inexact gloss of this term. The use of the term *teotl* in the historical sources cannot automatically be assumed to mean “gods” as we understand it due to these ambiguities of translation. If an alternative translation of *teotl* is used, the Aztec perception of the Spaniards changes fundamentally and the Spaniards become much more mundane players in the events of the conquest. It cannot be assumed that the Aztecs always, or ever, used the term *teotl* to specifically mean “god,” so the presence of this Nahuatl term in the historical sources does not definitively reveal an Aztec belief in the Spaniards as gods.

Another term applied to the Spaniards, *tlatoani*, is also a difficult Nahuatl term to translate. Townsend notes that this term was applied to the Spaniards after the conquest, meaning “king” in one translation.³⁵ However, Clendinnen notes that through the ancient Aztec ritual to become *tlatoani* the ruler-elect was no longer considered merely human, but as the voice of the gods. A *tlatoani* was a vessel through which the gods made their wishes known, blurring the lines between the human and the divine.³⁶ However, Clendinnen does specify that “the *tlatoani*’s sacredness was not a state, but a condition...[which] could on occasion become the vehicle of that divine force.”³⁷ Therefore, the *tlatoani* was not truly a god, though he could supposedly communicate with and carry out the deities’ wishes. The *tlatoani* was man-god (*hombre-dios*), a common and confusing dichotomy in Aztec belief, but definitively below the sacred sphere of the true Aztec deities. After the Spaniards asserted their authority over the native peoples, they

³⁴ Smith, *The Aztecs*, 199.

³⁵ Townsend, “Burying the White Gods,” 673.

³⁶ Clendinnen, *Aztecs*, 77-83.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 81.

were given this far more secular title, a demotion that seems illogical if the Aztecs had always believed the Spaniards to be deities.³⁸

While the problem of Nahuatl translation clearly poses an issue for modern scholars in the interpretation of the published record of the conquest, this obstacle would also have led to miscommunication from the outset in Aztec-Spaniard interaction; the tale of Spanish deification may thus have arisen from imprecise oral translation. None of the Spanish *conquistadores* were able or willing to learn Nahuatl when they arrived in Mexico, necessitating a translator throughout the period of exploration. According to Bernal Díaz, Cortés's expedition started first in Mayan language territory, and they acquired a Spanish- and Mayan-speaking Spaniard who had been left behind by a previous expedition. Later, the Spaniards acquired the services of La Malinche, an Aztec woman who could speak both Mayan and Nahuatl, but did not learn Spanish until after the conquest. Therefore, all conversations between Spaniards and Aztecs had to go through two separate translations, by two different people, greatly increasing the chances of miscommunication and misunderstanding.

The potential inaccuracy of Motolinía and Sahagún's works could stem from their non-native perspective and the difficulties of understanding the Nahuatl language. While the Nahuatl language sources do not share all of these same problems, even these texts still require further scrutiny. As stated above, the pre-Conquest Aztecs did not possess their own phonetic writing system; this type of writing was taught to them by the Spanish *conquistadores* and missionaries. While these texts are in the native language, the Aztecs had to be taught phonetic writing by the

³⁸ To me, it would seem to make more sense to call the Spaniards gods once they had achieved full political power within the empire, not simply that of a king. I instead think the term *teotl* was used for the Spaniards because of their obvious technological advantages and because of the lack of information about their origins until further interaction occurred.

Spaniards, allowing for Spanish influence to pervade the Nahuatl language texts. The Nahuatl records all date to at least two decades after the Spanish Conquest of Mexico, a time gap that could also have permitted Spanish tales and biases to influence the Nahua writers.

There are a variety of Nahua perspectives displayed in the records that must be analyzed as well. The terms “Aztec,” “Mexica,” and “Nahua” are all equivalently used, but they encompass a variety of people living throughout Mexico. The Aztec Empire under Moctezuma was expansionist, and each city was forcibly brought under the central rule of Tenochtitlán. All the cities of the Aztec Empire had to pay tribute to the capitol, though many cities were unhappy with their subordination, and each city maintained some independent identity. There were also wholly independent cities throughout Mexico which often fought against the Aztec Empire. This politically tumultuous and unstable geopolitical situation allows for a variety of perspectives even within the corpus of the so-called “Nahua” writings.

For example, the Codex Aubin was written by the inhabitants of Tenochtitlán, the Tenochca, in the 1560s, providing a Tenochca perspective on their encounters with the Spanish *conquistadores*. This source was written long after the Spanish Conquest of Mexico though, and in those intervening decades the Spanish dominance in Tenochtitlán may have influenced what was included in the codex. The reference to the Spaniard Pedro de Alvarado as the Aztec Sun God may be one such example of this phenomenon. The Annals of Tlatelolco are closest to the opinions of the city of Tenochtitlán, as Tlatelolco was directly adjacent to the capitol. However, the annals still record the events of the Spanish Conquest of Mexico from an outsiders’ perspective, observing the Aztec-Spaniard interactions rather than fully participating in the Tenochca Aztecs’ encounter with the Spaniards.

The Annals of Quauhtitlan, on the other hand, originated in a wholly different city in the Valley of Mexico and does not even focus on the Tenochca or their interactions with the Spaniards. This later document does not specifically equate the Spanish *conquistadores* with Aztec deities, although this might be explained by the distance of Quauhtitlan from the action that took place at Tenochtitlán. These annals do provide another Nahua source of the events of the conquest, but the details are not very specific or credible.

Finally, the Nahua songs, while directly related to the pre-Conquest oral tradition and normally outside the Spanish realm of writing, must also be critically examined. The greatest difficulty with Nahua songs is the lack of specific information regarding the origins of these songs. The “Water-pouring song” quoted above cannot be dated with accuracy; it is simply obvious that it was written down sometime after the Spanish Conquest of Mexico. There is also no information provided on the authors of Nahua songs. The city of origin of a song could greatly affect the opinions expressed in the song, as the annals examples above reveal. This vital information for analyzing the details of the songs is permanently missing, resulting in yet another difficulty in using these songs in scholarly research about the Spaniards’ deification.

Many of the post-Conquest records, written from a variety of Nahua perspectives, include the myth of Spanish deification in their descriptions of the Spanish Conquest of Mexico. The prevalence of these details has led some scholars to conclude the Aztecs genuinely believed the Spaniards to be gods during their initial interactions. However, the possible biases of the recorders, the European origin of the Nahua phonetic writing system, and the divisions among the inhabitants of Mexico themselves provide a number of variables that make these

mythologizing facts problematic. If the Aztec sources are so questionable, how else could this tale of Spanish deification by the Aztecs have arisen?

III. European Mythmaking

If the Aztecs did not conceive the tale of Spanish deification themselves, then the Spaniards might have been the source of this myth. This chapter provides evidence for the Spaniards as the original source of the tale of Spanish deification. Many modern scholars present this argument as the alternative to the Aztecs “naively” believing the Spaniards to be gods. For, as it turns out, the tale of Spanish deification by the Aztecs is not a unique historical phenomenon. The abundance of similar tales of deification throughout European history suggests a both historical precedent and a pattern for creating such myths, most often when Europeans encountered “others” very different from themselves. Strikingly similar accounts of European apotheosis by vastly different cultural groups also appear contemporaneous to and long after the Spanish Conquest of Mexico. Just as the previous chapter revealed the flaws of arguing that the Aztecs were the source of the myth of Spanish deification, though, this chapter will also conclude with a critical analysis of the evidence “proving” the Spaniards were the true source of that legend.

A. Pre-Conquest Examples of European Apotheosis

Western European civilization often traces its roots back to the Roman Empire, and though this polytheistic culture would necessarily have had a different perspective on deities, the Romans’ deification of their mortal leaders sets a precedent for the future genre of European apotheosis narratives. Suetonius, a Roman knight who wrote a number of biographies in the first and second centuries A.D., records the deification of certain Roman emperors upon their deaths

in his work *The Twelve Caesars*. Throughout his work, Suetonius specifies in his chapter titles which of the first twelve Roman emperors were deified, including Julius Caesar, Augustus, Claudius, Vespasian and Titus, as well as which emperors were not venerated. He begins with the life history of Julius Caesar, the first Roman emperor to be exalted, describing the deification as such:

He was fifty-five years old when he died, and his immediate deification, formally decreed, was more than a mere official decree since it reflected public conviction; if only because, on the first day of the Games given by his successor Augustus in honour of the apotheosis, a comet appeared about an hour before sunset and shone for seven days running. This was held to be Caesar's soul, elevated to the Heavens.³⁹

Suetonius emphasizes the sincere belief of the Roman people in Julius Caesar as a god, and clearly Caesar's deification set a precedent for future Roman leaders as well as other European leaders to be deified.

Another Roman era example can be found in Velleius Paterculus's account of Roman history. Velleius is often considered more of a courtly annalist than true historian, largely due to his lavish praise of Julius Caesar, Augustus, and Tiberius, of which the first two were officially deified. Tiberius was, though, deified in Velleius's work in a passage describing an encounter between Tiberius and his German foes, the civilized Romans versus the barbaric Germans. During a break in the fighting, "one of the barbarians...steered this odd kind of vessel to the middle of the river and asked to be granted safe passage to disembark on the bank that we were holding and to see Caesar." This one man proceeded to praise Tiberius as a god, stating, "I, Caesar, thanks to your kind permission, have seen the gods of whom I only used to hear about

³⁹ Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, *The Twelve Caesars* (New York: Penguin, 1979), 53.

before,” and then returned to his own camp while marveling at Tiberius.⁴⁰ In this single example of the numerous tales of encounters between “civilized” Roman descendants and “uncivilized others,” the former group is deified by the latter, just as the Aztec “others” later are said to have deified the more “civilized” Spaniards.

The apotheosis of Europeans did not cease with the fall of the Roman Empire and the decline of polytheistic traditions in favor of the Christian faith. In fact, many aspects of the Christian faith would encourage the generation of somewhat similar tales of apotheosis. The Christian faith that still dominated European life in the sixteenth century was based on the sincere belief that a man on Earth was the Son of God. That man, Jesus of Nazareth, was deified by his followers following his death in an account not dissimilar from the apotheosis of Roman emperors.⁴¹ Jesus’s apotheosis, though, provides a much stronger precedent for and connection to the Spaniards of the sixteenth century than the Roman example, more directly influencing the Spaniards’ ability to concoct the account of their deification by the natives of Mexico.

The Christian faith does not, of course, support deification of any humans to the status of true God; indeed, the religion explicitly prohibits it. However, it did promote a slightly different kind of exaltation of important members of the Church. For example, nearly all of Christ’s apostles were promoted to the level of sainthood, and those faithful persecuted by the Roman edicts were revered as martyrs. Saints possessed the ability to intercede between God and his followers, placing them above humans in the divine hierarchy, though not at the same level of God.⁴² The saints of the Christian faith, while not apotheosized in the same manner as was

⁴⁰ Velleius Paterculus, *The Roman History: From Romulus and the Foundation of Rome to the Reign of the Emperor Tiberius* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2011), 123.

⁴¹ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (London: Penguin, 1993), 12.

⁴² Chadwick, *Early Church*, 174.

claimed in the historical sources for the Spanish by the Aztecs, nonetheless provide another precedent within European tradition for the exaltation of mere mortals.

Not surprisingly, it is the stories surrounding the saints that provide the closest connection between the Aztec-Spanish situation and the European past. Stories about saints were developed to preserve a record of the good works of the saints and to inspire future generations of Christians. The tale of Spanish apotheosis details the trials the Spaniards had to face in “civilizing” the New World and eventually triumphing over it, inspiring future explorers to persevere as well. Saints’ stories can also be linked to the tale of Spanish apotheosis through their means of production. Both types of stories were attested to by someone else, not by the subject in question, whether the saint or Hernán Cortés.

However, there is an important distinction between these types of narratives that must be noted, but which nonetheless supports the argument for Europeans as the source of the Spanish apotheosis tale. In the case of saints, stories were created by other Christians, about Christians, and were later believed by Christians. The tale of Spanish apotheosis, on the other hand, as a European source would be written by Christians, about the “heathen” Aztecs, and then not fully believed by later groups, as evident in the current scholarly debate. The main purpose of the tale of Spanish apotheosis might then have been to prove exactly how heathen the Aztecs were, precisely because they believed the Spaniards to be gods. Such a tale also has the added effect of exalting the Spanish *conquistadores*, both for successfully conquering the heathens and directly linking the Spaniards to gods. This account, within the framework of Christianity, serves to exalt the *conquistadores* almost to the level of the saints, without doing so directly, since the belief in their holiness stems entirely from the Aztecs, according to the apotheosis tale.

The cultural foundation of Western Europe, the Roman Empire, deified important and beloved emperors and later became a romantic example of civilization, providing an influential historical base for the Spaniards to deify themselves in the name of the Aztecs. The Christian religion, which played a central role throughout the Spanish Conquest of Mexico and the colonization period that followed, also habitually deified or elevated mortal persons to an exalted position. These Christian examples present a more relevant precedent than the Roman model for the tale of Spanish deification that arose from the conquest, suggesting perhaps that the Spaniards were the designers of that myth.

B. Post-Conquest Deifications and Analysis

A tale of European deification contemporaneous with the Spanish Conquest of Mexico also arose in Peru. The Spaniards completed their capture of the Incan Empire in 1532, just over a decade after their victory in Mexico. Olivia Harris, a modern anthropologist, writes of the deification of Francisco Pizarro, the leader of the Spanish forces in Peru, as “what today seems like an uncanny reenactment” of the Spaniards’ deification in Mexico.⁴³ Harris quotes Sarmiento: “When Atahualpa heard this [the arrival of the Spanish] he was delighted, believing that it was Viracocha who had come, just as he had promised them when he went away...And he gave thanks to Viracocha because he was coming at the appointed time.”⁴⁴ Replacing the Peruvian names with Aztec names results in the exact same tale of Cortés and his connection to Quetzalcoatl. Pizarro is linked to a god who left his people and promised to return, just as Cortés

⁴³ Olivia Harris, “‘The Coming of the White People:’ Reflections on the Mythologisation of History in Latin America.” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* vol. 14 no.1 (1995): 13.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

was linked with Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl who behaved in this exact manner. The importance of Pizarro's time of arrival is also an integral part of the alleged belief in his divinity, exactly as had been the case for Cortés's connection to Quetzalcoatl. Yet these strikingly similar tales arose out of two vastly different Amerindian cultures, suggesting that these similarities stem from the only common factor to both tales, the Spanish *conquistadores*.

Tales of European deification by "other" parties continued to arise long after the events in Mexico. One later European apotheosis narrative that is frequently studied by modern scholars, and is often directly compared to the Aztec-Spanish episode, centers on Captain James Cook and his "discovery" of the Hawaiian Islands. Succinctly, the apotheosis narrative of Captain Cook states he "landed on the shores of Hawai'i on Sunday, 17 January 1779, during the festival of Makahiki, [and] he was greeted as the returning god Lono."⁴⁵ Even with this short summary of the Cook myth, obvious parallels can be seen to the Cortés-Quetzalcoatl myth, such as the specific timing of Cook's arrival and his immediate association with the god of that specific ritual, a similarity that holds up under closer inspection.

Lono was the god of fertility in Hawaiian cosmology and was the presiding deity over the Makahiki festival, an annual affair observed as a renewal of the land. Lono, who usually resided in Kealahou Bay, would circle the Islands during the Makahiki in two forms: as the "Long God" circling the archipelago in a counterclockwise direction and as the "Short God" circling only the island of Hawaii in the clockwise direction. During the Makahiki, Lono was represented

⁴⁵ Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 3.

as a crosspiece draped with long pieces of white cloth, and was worshipped through animal sacrifices and the ritual suspension of war and fishing.⁴⁶

In the tale of Cook's association with Lono, a connection is first made between Cook's seven-week circulation of the Islands and Lono's actions as the "Long God." The large sails on Cook's ships were also likened to the symbolic representation of Lono as the draped crosspiece. Cook also happened to anchor himself in Kealahou Bay, the supposed resting place of the Hawaiian god Lono.⁴⁷ Some scholars, most prominently Marshall Sahlins, have calculated Cook's arrival time to be exactly during that year's Makahiki festival.⁴⁸

These details, as well as others corresponding to Cook's stay on the island, are cited as "proof" that the Hawaiians would have associated Cook with the year-god Lono. Direct parallels to these links between Cook and Lono can be seen in the Cortés-Quetzalcoatl narrative. As stated above, one tale of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl includes a promise that "a bearded people will eventually rule the land," and the Spaniards bearded physiques then linked them to Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl's promise.⁴⁹ This visual connection is similar to the physical similarity between Cook's sails and the material representation of Lono in the account of Cook's deification. The affinity between Cook's actions, both circling the Hawaiian Islands and landing in Kealahou Bay, and the characteristics of Lono is similar to the connection made between Cortés's arrival from the East and Quetzalcoatl's predicted return from that same direction. Finally, the timing of both men's arrivals was crucial to the formation of these tales, as the Makahiki is strongly

⁴⁶ Obeyesekere, *Apotheosis of Captain Cook*, 51-53.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Marshall Sahlins, *How "Natives" Think: About Captain Cook For Example* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 31-33.

⁴⁹ See note 23 on page 12.

affiliated with Lono and the year 1 Reed is coupled with Quetzalcoatl. Such similarities allow for a great deal of comparison between these two historic events, including comparison of scholarly evaluation of these two tales.

As with the myth of Spanish deification by the Aztecs, the tale of Cook's apotheosis is evaluated by two diametrically opposed scholarly fields. One, following the lines of the previous chapter, argues that the Hawaiians truly believed Cook to be Lono. This field is heralded by anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, whose arguments will be discussed in part below. By contrast, Gananath Obeyesekere, a late twentieth century anthropologist, makes a strong and detailed argument for the wholly European origins of Cook's apotheosis, completely refuting Sahlins's thesis. Obeyesekere's primary argument for a European origin of Cook's deification is Max Weber's concept of "practical rationality," "the process whereby human beings reflectively assess the implications of a problem in terms of practical criteria."⁵⁰ He argues that the Hawaiians, upon encountering Cook and his men, would have developed a rational opinion of the newcomers and deduced that they were mere mortals from the outset of their interactions. To Obeyesekere, naivety and a "prelogical mentality" lead to the apotheosis of a human, qualities he argues are not present in any human society, including the eighteenth-century Hawaiians.⁵¹

Obeyesekere continues with this argument, attempting to prove the rationality of the Hawaiians. First, he notes that Cook's English ships did not in the slightest resemble the canoes of the Hawaiian Islands, which would have signaled to the Islanders that those on the ships were not related to Hawaiian history at all. He then remarks on the un-Hawaiian appearance of the newcomers, and, moreover, the uncleanliness of the Europeans. Obeyesekere argues the

⁵⁰ Obeyesekere, *Apotheosis of Captain Cook*, 19.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 19-22.

Hawaiians would have expected their gods to look familiar and, frankly, “godly,” a presence the newly arrived Europeans did not portray. Obeyesekere also argues against the similarity between Cook’s sailing pattern and Lono’s expected movements. As stated above, Lono took on two forms and circled the island in two different directions. Cook and his men only fulfilled the task of the “Long God;” would not Cook or some other earthly manifestation of Lono also have completed the “Short God” task simultaneously, argues Obeyesekere? Cook only fulfills half of the Lono ritual; the fact that he doesn’t complete this other task throughout his stay in Hawaii, and is not forced to by the natives, suggests that the Hawaiians did not view Cook as Lono.⁵²

Obeyesekere also notes the inconsistencies between Cook’s actions on land and those that would befit a god of such stature as Lono. For example, Cook is forced to prostrate himself before an image of Ku, another Hawaiian god associated with chiefly power, and moreover, the chiefs Cook met never prostrated themselves before Cook. Obeyesekere finds it unlikely that Cook, if considered Lono by the Hawaiians, would be forced to worship another god, and would not be worshipped by the Hawaiian chiefs. Obeyesekere also notes that Cook and his men were known throughout the island to carry, and infect the natives with, venereal disease, a characteristic quite opposite to Lono’s description as a god of fertility. Finally, there is no evidence in Hawaiian history of a deity ever arriving in material, let alone human, form. Obeyesekere argues that the arrival of the god “in person” would have upset the Hawaiians’ ritual practices. Obeyesekere believes the Hawaiian natives would have recognized all these inconsistencies between their conception of Lono and the appearance and actions of Cook and his men, and therefore would not have equated Cook with Lono at any time.⁵³

⁵² Obeyesekere, *Apotheosis of Captain Cook*, 64.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 60-66.

Obeyesekere also notes the difficulties for modern scholars in reading the documents contemporaneous with Cook's exploration of Hawaii. Cook kept records of his explorations in a journal, but his last journal entry dates to 17 January 1779, so there are no documents from Cook himself regarding his alleged deification by the Hawaiians. Other members of Cook's crew did keep personal records after the seventeenth of January, though Obeyesekere notes that none of the "major journalists" noted a connection between Cook and Lono.⁵⁴ Some of the journalists note that the islanders seemed to adore Cook, and when they did mention the term "Lono," they believed it to be a title, not the name of a god. One journalist, Samwell, wrote that the Hawaiians told him Lono lived in the sky, which would suggest Cook was not Lono, since Cook was clearly on land and claimed to be from "Brittancee."⁵⁵ Interestingly, one member of Cook's crew, surnamed Vancouver, returned to Hawaii a few years later, and noted in his later journal the specific activities of the Makahiki, details that were not mentioned in any of the earlier journals. Vancouver also made no connection between his first journey to Hawaii with Cook, supposedly during the Makahiki, and the activities he now described. This suggests the Makahiki may not have been happening at the time of Cook's arrival, undermining a crucial point of the tale of Cook's apotheosis.⁵⁶ Importantly, all of the ships' logs were handed over to the Admiralty upon return to England, at which point the journals were heavily edited by courtly figures.⁵⁷ Therefore, it cannot be known to what extent the information found in the journals was changed, what

⁵⁴ Obeyesekere, *Apotheosis of Captain Cook*, 49.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 61 and 76.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 68-73.

information was lost or added later, and the entire tale of Cook's deification may be affected by the alterations to the journals.

One striking similarity between the tales of Cook's deification and that of Cortés is the presence of a language barrier that would have affected the terms of deification. Obeyesekere notes that "even the term for a god, *akua*, is...of indeterminate usage," revealing the Hawaiian term for a deity to be equally as nebulous as the Nahuatl term *teotl*.⁵⁸ The entire time that Cook was with the Hawaiians, he and the rest of his crew were unable to understand the natives, only possessing a few Tahitian words that were of limited use.⁵⁹ Therefore, much had to have been lost in translation between these two very different groups, as neither could understand each other, and the recorded words may have been misinterpreted or misheard, leading to European misunderstanding of Hawaiian interpretations.

In sum, Obeyesekere believes "it [is] virtually certain that Cook being called Lono can be accounted for without attributing to Hawaiians the belief that he was the *god* Lono arrived in person during the Makahiki."⁶⁰ He considers all human cultures to possess "practical rationality," making the Hawaiians, and any other group, incapable of believing that the obviously mortal, human newcomers were gods. Obeyesekere even relates Cook's deification to the Spanish situation in Mexico, specifically implying his rationale applies to the Aztec case as well. He is also highly skeptical of the written record of Cook's encounter with the Hawaiians, as there is no account of this episode by Cook himself, and all of the other journals were heavily edited by official English hands. This notion of "practical rationality" and his distrust of the primary

⁵⁸ Obeyesekere, *Apotheosis of Captain Cook*, 140.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

documents relating to Cook's "discovery" of the Hawaiian Islands have led Obeyesekere to refute the claim of Cook's apotheosis, and ascribe it instead to a European invention.

These same arguments can be applied to the tale of Spanish deification dating to the sixteenth century. Obeyesekere argues that all human cultures possess a "practical rationality" that would prohibit them from classifying foreign visitors as gods. If Obeyesekere's argument holds true, this idea of "practical rationality" would apply to all human cultures, throughout history, and therefore the Aztecs could not possibly have believed the Spaniards to be gods. The Spaniards would not have physically resembled the Aztecs, and this striking difference coupled with the Spaniards' foreign language and actions would not allow for the newcomers to be linked with Aztec divine beings.

Obeyesekere also argues that Cook did not act very god-like, especially when compared with the expected behavior of Lono, and such a comparison can also be made between Cortés and Quetzalcoatl with Cortés coming up short. Quetzalcoatl was a high god, most closely linked with the priesthood. Cortés, on the other hand, was constantly engaged in warfare with natives of outlying cities and repeatedly destroyed Aztec idols and places of worship. If Cortés was Quetzalcoatl, he should have preserved Aztec beliefs and traditions, rather than upending them.

Finally, Obeyesekere questions the veracity of the historical documents dating to the "discovery" of Hawaii, and notes inconsistencies in the equation of Cook with the Hawaiian god Lono. In the Spanish case, the only documents definitively dating to time of the Spanish Conquest of Mexico are the letters Cortés himself wrote to the Spanish monarch. In none of these letters does Cortés equate himself with Quetzalcoatl, or for that matter does he equate any of the other *conquistadores* with Aztec deities. While Cortés does not link himself to

Quetzalcoatl, the questionable veracity of his letters might make this omission suspect. His letters can be questioned since they were sent to the king of Spain, and as official political documents, may have been edited just as Cook's and his shipmates' journals were to be two centuries later by the English Admiralty. If Cortés had written about his deification, those details are now erased from history, possibly because the Spanish monarch did not appreciate one of his captains possessing a higher title than himself. While this poses yet another interesting dilemma in this study, no other scholarly work questions the veracity of Cortés's letters, suggesting they should be studied as written. Applying Obeyesekere's arguments to the Spanish case, it appears to be impossible for the Aztecs to have believed the Spaniards to be gods, suggesting therefore that the tale of Spanish deification was wholly concocted by European writers.

Before moving to a critical review of these arguments, it should be noted that Obeyesekere's work on Cook is hotly contested. Anthropologist Marshall Sahlins firmly contradicts the European source of apotheosis myths as he systematically dismantles Obeyesekere's work and arguments. Sahlins finds particular issue with Obeyesekere's main point, the "practical rationality" of all human societies. Sahlins calls Obeyesekere's work "pidgin anthropology," as Obeyesekere's work "negat[es] Hawaiian cultural particularity in favor of a universal practical rationality."⁶¹ Sahlins argues that each human culture is unique, and therefore that universal human perception cannot exist. He claims that human cultures are too varied for the notion of "practical rationality" to be applicable, indicating a severe flaw in Obeyesekere's main argument.

⁶¹ Sahlins, *How "Natives" Think*, 9.

Sahlins then attempts to prove that the Hawaiians truly believed Cook to be Lono, first by calculating the exact dates of the Makahiki in the Gregorian calendar year 1779. He arrives at two slightly different figures, both of which include Cook's date of arrival, but one of which, the December Makahiki, matches up more precisely with the beginning rituals of Lono and Cook's circulation of the Islands.⁶² Sahlins calculates the date of the Makahiki based on the standardization effected by Kamehameha, which Obeyesekere argues would be inaccurate, since the Makahiki was not practiced identically and synchronously on each Hawaiian island before Kamehameha's reign. This dispute remains unsettled.⁶³

Sahlins continues by tracing the actions of the Hawaiian people and particularly those of the chief, detailing how each action was directly in accordance with the rituals of the Makahiki and with the appropriate treatment of a god. When Cook first arrived in Kealahou Bay, he was not met by the chief, who had been warring in Maui. Sahlins claims that Cook was met by the chief eight days later, which would have been appropriate for the required hiatus on war and chiefly movement at the start of the Makahiki.⁶⁴ He then notes that the Hawaiians did not trade fish with the Europeans during the month of December, according to the logs within the shipmen's journals. This shift in trade patterns would be consistent with the ritual taboo on fishing during the Makahiki as well.⁶⁵

Similar to the Aztec situation, Sahlins notes the Hawaiian "belief of the ancients that he [Lono] had gone to Kahiki ["heaven"] and would return."⁶⁶ A sincere belief in the return of Lono

⁶² Sahlins, *How "Natives" Think*, 31-33.

⁶³ Obeyesekere, *Apotheosis of Captain Cook*, 98.

⁶⁴ Sahlins, *How "Natives" Think*, 37.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 43-45.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

from Kahiki, which phonetically sounds similar to Tahiti, one of Cook's previous stops, would encourage the Hawaiians to identify Cook with Lono. However, this "belief" is only recorded in a nineteenth-century source, which I find just as suspect as the post-Spanish Conquest records containing the only indication that Cortés had been linked with Quetzalcoatl. The actions of the Hawaiians throughout their interactions with Cook are also described as appropriate treatment for a god by Sahlins. Written accounts of the Europeans' first encounter with the Hawaiians describes a massive fleet of over 500 canoes surrounding the European galleys and attempting to greet the newcomers. Sahlins claims that never had such a large corpus of canoes historically been used to greet a chief, therefore indicating the heightened status given to the Europeans. The priests then took Cook to the island temple and gave him a rotting pig, which Sahlins argues is an example of re-sacrificing the pig to Lono, now that Lono was there in person.⁶⁷ Sahlins highlights another instance of the Islanders treating Cook as Lono when he mentions the priests confiding in Cook their dislike for the chief.⁶⁸ Lono's alliance with the priesthood renders this interaction appropriate, and disproves Obeyesekere's argument that the Hawaiians may have actually regarded Cook as Ku, the warlike deity associated with the chiefs.

Sahlins's therefore argues for cultural uniqueness; to explain the interactions in light of the Makahiki festival, he ultimately concludes that the Hawaiians truly believed Cook to be the god Lono. Sahlins believes the Hawaiians to be the source of the tale of Cook's deification, so the tale should be seriously considered when studying the interactions of the Hawaiians and Europeans.

⁶⁷ Sahlins, *How "Natives" Think*, 47-53.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

D. Arguments Against Europeans Concocting Apotheosis Myths

Thus far, this chapter has revealed the European precedent for deifying important historical figures, as well as the presence of strikingly similar tales of European deification both contemporaneous to and centuries after the Spanish case in question. However, while this argument, for a consistent European source of apotheosis myths, is clearly followed by scholars such as Obeyesekere, it is not without fault, just as arguing for a strictly “native” source of these deifying tales was shown to be questionable in the previous chapter. The rest of this chapter will elucidate the fallacies of this argument, revealing the difficulties modern scholars encounter when they argue for either a truly “native” or purely “European” source for deification tales, including the Spanish deification by the Aztecs.

As stated above, the Roman historical precedent can be deemed invalid simply on account of the polytheistic nature of the Roman Empire’s state religion, a stark contrast to the monotheistic theology driving the Spaniards of the sixteenth century. Also, while it might be argued that the Christian religion frequently “deified” important figures through the mechanism of sainthood, the religion steadfastly preached the unalterable primacy of God and that no man could acquire a truly deified status. The Christian religion only exalted exemplary Christians upon death through martyrdom, not in life as in the tales of apotheosis. Therefore, while historical precedent is clearly in place, it may be that these events had no real effect on the rise of the Spanish deification tale.

The contemporary tale of Spanish deification in the Andes provides a strikingly similar story to that of the Spaniards in Mexico, making the veracity of both tales suspect. The Incan culture and the Aztecs of Mexico formed very different societies, suggesting perhaps that the

commonality between these two narratives, namely the Spaniards themselves, was their true source. However, one cannot assume the Aztec tale is false simply because a similar tale arises in Peru, and vice versa. This reasoning does, though, serve to argue the case for the unlikelihood of such similar tales of apotheosis arising in very different cultures, supporting the argument for a European source of these myths as well. Though these two contemporary tales of Spanish apotheosis are extremely similar, one cannot assume both tales are of Spanish origin due to the cultural differences of the Aztecs and the Incans, differences that could make one or even both tales true.

Just as Obeyesekere's arguments can be applied to the Spanish case, as done above, so can Sahlins's counterarguments, casting in doubt the argument that the Europeans were the source of the deification stories. If all human cultures are fundamentally different and unique, one cannot argue for a "practical rationality" in all cultures. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that the Aztecs immediately would have dismissed the possibility of the Spaniards being gods. Clearly a deeper study of Aztec beliefs is required to determine whether they truly thought the Spaniards were divine beings.

Calculations, such as Sahlins's calculations of the Makahiki as a method of proving that the Hawaiians believed Cook to be Lono, have also been conducted in the Spanish case. The year of the Spaniards' arrival in Mexico, 1519, has been calculated by scholars as dating to the year *Ce acatl*, or 1 Reed, the year associated with Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl's birth and departure from Mexico. Cortés's arrival from the East, the direction associated with the year symbol Reed, as well as the important link between Quetzalcoatl and the year 1 Reed, would provide ample reasoning for the Aztecs to equate Cortés with Quetzalcoatl.

It can also be determined whether the Aztecs treated the Spaniards as they would a god by examining the Aztecs' behavior around the Spaniards. For example, the Aztecs are said to have marveled at the Spaniards on their horses, believing man and horse to be a single mythic being, like a centaur.⁶⁹ The Aztecs' reaction to the combination of man and horse would suggest they considered the Spaniards at least to be magnificent, if not specifically to be deities. The Spaniards and their horses, as one being, represented a novel and awe-inspiring sight, and the human Spaniards who accompanied these mythical beasts might also have been regarded differently than any Aztec man, who clearly did not own a "centaur." The Aztecs also did nothing to prohibit the Spaniards from entering their city, only violently excluding them after the Spaniards killed some Tenochca.⁷⁰ This "welcoming" of the Spaniards into the city seems, at least from the European vantage point, to be an act of respect and deferment, for why else would the Aztecs so warmly welcome an unknown troupe of warriors into their city? Such an act would not have been conducted unless the Aztecs revered the Spaniards. Many of the Aztecs' actions can be seen as direct evidence of their sincere belief in the Spaniards as gods, just as the Hawaiians' actions are similarly scrutinized in Sahlins's work.

In this chapter, a number of arguments have been presented to propose that the Europeans were the source of all apotheosis myths arising from their encounters with "others." Tales of human deification can be found within the European historic memory since at least the era of the Roman Empire, as the writings of Suetonius and Velleius Paterculus reveal. An uncannily similar tale of Spanish apotheosis arose contemporaneously with the Mexican story, further casting

⁶⁹ Bernal Díaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*, trans. J.M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1963), 76.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 281.

doubt on the claim that the different native groups were each an original source of these tales. The prevalence of European deification tales long after the events in Mexico also point to Europeans as the ultimate source of apotheosis stories. However, each of these arguments can be refuted, and have been by both myself and other scholars, as laid out in this chapter. In the previous chapter, the argument that the Aztecs truly believed the Spanish to be gods was presented and subsequently questioned. Similarly, the argument that the Europeans generated this and other apotheosis tales has been presented and refuted in this chapter. Neither of these points, of view, then, is entirely conclusive.

IV. Conclusion

Scholarly work on the Spanish Conquest of Mexico focuses on the Aztec belief in the Spaniards as deities. As this thesis has shown, discussion of the tale of Spanish deification by the Aztecs is divided into two camps. The first group staunchly supports the tale as traditionally told and supported by the Aztecs' beliefs and the Nahuatl-language texts. These scholars note certain Aztec beliefs in their arguments, such as the importance attributed to and symbolism embedded in their conceptions of time as well as the elusive concept of the *hombre-dios*, or "man-gods," in the hierarchy of mortals and deities. The inclusion of this tale of apotheosis in Nahuatl-language texts provides rather convincing evidence that the Aztecs themselves were the source of this claim, and truly believed the Spanish *conquistadores* to be deities during the Conquest period.

On the other hand, some scholars refute this legend's validity by illustrating the extensive European influence on all the documentation about the Conquest era. Phonetic writing did not exist in the "New World" until the Spaniards arrived, who taught this technique to the natives. Therefore, all written sources had to have come into contact with Spanish opinion, either directly, through Spanish writers, or more indirectly, through the education of future Nahuatl writers in Spanish colleges. This influence would have dictated what was written, and the presence of the myth of Spanish deification first in Spanish-language works and then Nahuatl-language texts suggests the Spaniards as the more likely source of this narrative. This argument, paired with the European tradition of apotheosizing important figures and the continuation of this practice into at least the eighteenth century, as apparent in the example of Captain Cook in Hawaii, suggests the Spaniards fabricated this myth of deification.

Neither of these arguments can fully explain the rise of this deification tale. A focus on the Aztec beliefs and Nahuatl texts neglects the Spanish influence in recording these facts. Arguing for the wholly European origins of this account omits the cultural influences of the Aztecs. Both arguments are ultimately flawed as well. They both rely on pre-Conquest Aztec pictographs, which are open to wide interpretation by Aztecs, Spaniards, and scholars alike, and the written record of the conquest, which nearly all date after the conquest period, sometimes by a significant delay. The only documents from the years of the Spanish Conquest of Mexico are Hernán Cortés's letters, and though he does not explicitly state that he was regarded as a god, his works constitute only one source, and not necessarily a reliable source either. All other opinions, unfortunately, went unrecorded during the events of the conquest, permanently preventing a thorough review of the array of opinions formed between 1519 and 1521.

Some scholars, notably David Carrasco in his later work, take a more moderate stance on this tale of apotheosis, stating that the Aztecs may have initially believed the Spaniards to be gods but rapidly changed their minds.⁷¹ Overall, however, arguing whether the Aztecs truly believed the Spaniards to be gods or not is an impossible and futile task. The lack of Conquest-era documentation leaves a permanent gap in the historical record, and it is impossible for historians to extrapolate Aztec beliefs based on vague pictographs and Spanish-influenced written works, especially nearly six centuries after the events in question.

Scholarly work has ardently strived to produce a simple “yes or no” answer to the question “Did the Aztecs believe the Spaniards to be gods?,” but this is ultimately not the most interesting question one might ask anyway. Instead, I believe new questions need to be asked.

⁷¹ David Carrasco, *Moctezuma's Mexico: Visions of the Aztec World* (Boulder, Colo.: University Press of Colorado, 2003), 145-147.

Ultimately, whether the Aztecs truly believed the Spanish *conquistadores* to be gods or not is inconsequential. The Spaniards defeated the Aztecs in Tenochtitlán, and other reasons for this victory can be given than the “god-fearing” nature of the Aztecs. For example, the common anecdote that it was merely a band of 500 Spaniards who were able to defeat the Aztecs is misleading. In fact, the Spaniards acquired native allies from cities opposed to Tenochtitlán rule and expansion, vastly increasing the scope of their military resources and support.⁷² Due to the availability of other explanations for the Spaniards’ victory, the Aztecs’ belief in the Spaniards as gods is hardly essential for an explanation of the historical events.

Therefore, asking if the Aztecs truly believed the Spaniards to be gods is not historically significant. Instead, this tale of apotheosis should be studied from different angles that will produce novel and illuminating insights into the Aztecs, the Spanish, and their interactions during and after the Spanish Conquest of Mexico. Instead of focusing on the validity of the tale of Spanish deification, it would be more useful to discuss the importance of this tale to both the Aztec and the Spanish points of view.

Sahlins argues, with respect to the case of Cook and the Hawaiians, that this tale of apotheosis was continually retold because it was true.⁷³ I disagree, and would instead argue that the tale of Spanish deification was told and retold because it had some purpose and meaning to either, or both, societies involved. Felipe Fernández-Armesto presents three different explanations of the conquest in the early colonial society, each displaying the specific interests of its corresponding group: the *conquistadores* portrayed the conquest as a sum of individual efforts

⁷² For a detailed account of these indigenous allies of the Spaniards, see Laura E. Matthew and Michael R. Oudijk, eds., *Indian Conquistadores: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007).

⁷³ Sahlins, *How “Natives” Think*, 8.

achieved against a formidable foe, emphasizing the Spaniards' courage and skill; the friars believed the fall of Tenochtitlán to be divinely ordained, with God allowing the Spaniards to convert the world; finally, the Tlaxcalans, natives who allied with the Spaniards, thought of the conquest as a Tlaxcalan victory over Tenochtitlán, with the Spaniards as subordinate players.⁷⁴ Clearly, the conquest had different meanings for all the groups involved, so the myth of Spanish deification must be regarded in each of these different lights as well.

Motolinía's claim that the tale may have been perpetuated as an apologetic excuse for the Nahua ancestors' loss to the Spaniards merits further investigation as one method of analyzing this narrative. If the narrative is apologetic, the post-Conquest Nahuas could maintain the technologically-advanced and militarily-powerful images of their ancestors, with their only flaw being their devote religiosity. These Nahuas could then be proud of their ancestry and allow them to maintain a distinct identity from the Spanish *encomenderos*. They might also view themselves as improving on their ancestors' legacy, as they now adhered to the "correct" religion.

One might also ask why the Spanish would have wanted to propagate such a tale. Could it have been apologetic on the Spanish side as well, excusing their brutal conquest of the natives and their subsequent *encomienda* practices? If the Spaniards' works were divinely ordained and orchestrated, they themselves were no longer responsible for those actions. This narrative of the conquest could also have been apologetic propaganda to counter the circulation of the Black Legend. The Black Legend is often traced back to Bartolomé de las Casas' *Very Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies* written in 1552-1553, a critical account of the Spanish Conquest of Mexico. Subsequent anti-Spanish works continued to portray the Spanish *conquistadores* across

⁷⁴ Felipe Fernández-Armesto, "'Aztec' Auguries and Memories of the Conquest of Mexico," *Renaissance Studies* vol. 6 nos. 3-4 (1992): 296.

the globe as evil and sinister beings who brought only death and destruction to the lands they conquered.⁷⁵ Again, the argument of divinely ordained actions excuses the Spaniards from their actions that are vilified in the Black Legend. The myth could also have propagated ideals of Europeans as the dominant peoples of the world, with an obvious emphasis on depicting the pioneering Spaniards at the top of such a hierarchy, through the emphasis on the natives' "naive" beliefs. This ideology of dominance may also have had an impact on the Spaniards' future global expeditions, both encouraging further exploration and providing a model for Spanish victory, which would provide insight into centuries of Spanish history, rather than just the three years of the Spanish Conquest of Mexico.

Each of these topics surrounding the myth of Spanish deification by the Aztecs provides insight into both Aztec and Spanish societies following the conquest. Such questions need not be limited to the immediate post-Conquest period though. What effect did this tale of Spanish deification have on the Nahuas during the colonization period and beyond? Did it affect how the Nahuas interacted with their European counterparts, or how the Nahuas viewed themselves and their own culture? There is also an apparent syncretism in modern Mexican religious beliefs, such as the holiday "Día de los Muertos," in which native modes of ancestor worship are combined with the Catholic rites of All Souls' Day. This syncretism may be further understood through further examination of the sixteenth-century natives' religious beliefs. Again, such studies would be incredibly useful for understanding the history of Mexico, particularly in comparison to other Latin American societies, where a tale of deification does not exist so prominently.

⁷⁵ Benjamin Keen, "The Black Legend Revisited: Assumptions and Realities," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* vol. 49, no. 4 (1969): 703-704.

On another note, the debate over the myth of Spanish deification has clearly persisted through five centuries of historical change. What might that persistence tell us about specific historians writing on this topic during those five hundred years, on the societies they came from, or on our current society? Why have scholars put so much stock into the Aztecs' view of the Spaniards? For example, the field of anthropology has now become particularly taken with this type of myth, as it seeks to dispel arguments that presume one culture to be "better" than another, though possibly at the expense of historical accuracy. Again, using this tale as a tool for studying historical societies can provide novel information for many fields of study.

The scope of this thesis cannot possibly delve into all these questions involving the narrative of Spanish deification by the Aztecs of Mexico. Throughout this work, I hope I have revealed the popular arguments surrounding this tale, as well as the fallacies inherent in them. There are too many hindrances to answering the question "Did the Aztecs believe the Spaniards to be gods?." However, this narrative is still an integral part of the history of the Spanish Conquest of Mexico, and there are many other provocative questions that can be asked about this story, some of which have been indicated above. It is no longer prudent to question the Aztecs' beliefs in the sixteenth century; instead, this unique representation of the interactions between the Aztecs and Spaniards should be thoroughly reassessed to provide a wealth of novel and illuminating insights.

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