

Returning God or Blood Sacrifice:  
What were Moctezuma's Intentions Toward Cortés?

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Abstract

In my thesis I will be exploring why Moctezuma Xocoyotl, the leader of the Aztecs when they were conquered by the Spanish, sent Hernán Cortés, the leader of the invading Spanish, the sacred garments of three Aztec gods. Traditionally, the answer to this question has been that Moctezuma Xocoyotl thought Cortés was the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl returning to claim his empire. However, using the theoretical meanings of sacrifice and the dynamics of imperialism, I will examine the Aztec culture and their religious practices when the Spanish arrived to illustrate that this was not Moctezuma's intention. By examining the sixteenth century documents of the conquistadors and the Spanish priests as well as the surviving Aztec texts, I will present an alternative view of Moctezuma's intentions. I propose that Moctezuma did not think Cortés was Quetzalcoatl but intended to turn Cortes into a special sacrificial victim, a deity impersonator, to be sacrificed to Quetzalcoatl. This new view of Moctezuma, and how I arrived at it, can impact many academic fields: from the historical study of the Spanish Conquest of the New World and the examination of the literary trends found in historical documents to the study of cultural conflicts, imperialism and religious practices among indigenous people.