

AUTHORIAL (IM)PROPRIETY: FERNANDO DE ALVA IXTLILXÓCHITL VS. HERNÁN CORTÉS

Heather Allen
University of Chicago

Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, a mestizo historiographer, and Hernán Cortés, rebel Spanish conquistador, provide us with two conflicting accounts of one historical event. In both versions of this scandalous incident, Alva's *Decimatercia relación* and Cortés' *Quinta carta-relación*, Cortés secretly hangs several indigenous *caciques* because he believes they are plotting an insurrection.¹ His decision to surreptitiously assassinate these *caciques* is based upon his reading of an indigenous *dibujo* created by an Amerindian named Mexicalcingo, which he uses as dubious evidence of their treachery. However, here end the superficial similarities between the two reports. This is due in part to the fact that Cortés and Alva manipulate the evidence, including or excluding facts according to their conformity with the story they each wish to recount. Since Cortés and Alva have different ulterior motives, divergences between the two accounts are inevitable (Lolo 8; Velazco 34). Although both authors use the same genre, the *relación* – an “[i]nforme que la persona designada por la ley hace de lo substancial de un proceso ante un tribunal o juez [in this case the king of Spain]” (“relación”) – Alva is asking the Spanish colonial government to reinstate the property and power of dispossessed Texcocan nobles (Velazco 34), while Cortés is convincing the king that he made the best choice possible in the interests of the Crown.

Due to the authors' distinct goals, therefore, it is not surprising to find discrepancies between the two texts. Indeed, Cortés' and Alva's *relaciones* contradict each other to such a degree that one of the authors, or both, recounts a falsified history. In the following analysis, I will focus on the contradictions between the indigenous and Spanish authors' readings of the Amerindian Mexicalcingo's pictorial text. Although we would expect the authors to interpret such a text from within their own ethnic and historical perspectives, I seek to show that they manipulate both indigenous and European value systems in an effort to achieve their own personal goals. Cortés employs an indigenous interpretation in addition to a Western one, undermining his endeavor to reestablish control over the indigenous *caciques* and their troops. Alva's protagonist, Ixtlilxóchitl, on the other hand, is forced to accept a European analysis of the *dibujo*, which in turn problematizes Alva's reliance on written and painted indigenous sources to write his own history.

To begin his account and frame the event (which appears about halfway through the letter) Cortés addresses the king, explaining that “un ciudadano honrado de esta ciudad de

1. Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl shares his last name with his grandfather, the protagonist of the *Decimatercia relación*. To avoid confusion I will refer to the historiographer as Alva and his ancestor as Ixtlilxóchitl.

Tenexitlan, que se llamaba Mexicalcingo [...] vino a mi muy secretamente una noche y me trajo cierta figura en un papel de lo de su tierra" (236). This *figura*, together with Mexicalcingo's corresponding oral explanation which Cortés also delineates, provides the Spanish captain with the first news of the indigenous nobles' planned rebellion. Both the *figura* and the accompanying narrative are revealed to the reader in a long paragraph in which Cortés describes a well-developed plan for mutiny.

Another important fact revealed in the quote above is that it is Mexicalcingo who brings this news to Cortés of his own accord, and not as a result of the captain's command; this has strong implications for the message communicated to the King in the *relación* (236). It indicates that Cortés does not attribute the agency behind the *dibujo* to himself, but instead to the Amerindian.² Because he receives information about the rebellion from a voluntary independent source, he is able to imply the facts are reliable and certainly free from any of his own prejudices, misinterpretations, or misreadings. The indigenous messenger brings him intelligence data that has been processed and analyzed. It remains only for Cortés to decide what to do with such information. Handily for the captain, this news reinforces his previous suspicions of the indigenous leaders; he has in fact brought them with him on the journey to Hibueras because "[le] pareció que eran parte para la seguridad y revuelta de estas partes" (236). Leaving the recently conquered and resentful leaders unsupervised in Tenochtitlán while Cortés travels risks a new uprising; travelling with them means that the captain can constantly keep watch over the fractious *caciques*. Cortés' interpretation of Mexicalcingo's information is thus a simple matter of fitting the news of the coming mutiny with his earlier suspicions (Restall 150).

Alva, on the other hand, emphatically contradicts Cortés' account. Unlike the Spanish captain, who places agency for the *dibujo* squarely on Mexicalcingo, Alva declares that it is in fact Cortés who asks Mexicalcingo to draw the picture. Moreover, Alva's description of the Amerindian suggests that he is an informant. The mestizo historiographer explains that Cortés "se fiaba de él [Mexicalcingo] mucho, y le traía siempre los mensajes de todo lo que se hacía y decía en todo el ejército" (Ixtlilxóchitl 502). In other words, Mexicalcingo is a spy, listening surreptitiously to complaints and gauging the mood of the *caciques* and their troops, keeping Cortés up-to-date on the current disposition of the Amerindians. It is a way for the captain to anticipate any grievance or rebellion that may arise, and thus to maintain control over the recently subjugated indigenous people.

Alva's portrait of Mexicalcingo, whom he calls Coztemexi, is much sharper than the portrayal in the *Quinta carta-relación*, in which Cortés uses the vague phrase "un ciudadano honrado" to depict the spy (Cortés 236). With his description of Mexicalcingo, Alva aids us in deciphering the meaning behind the adjective "honrado," and together both authors paint a more complete portrait of the Amerindian artist's motivations. Keeping in mind Alva's rendering of a spying informant, Cortés' description of Mexicalcingo as a "ciudadano honrado" suggests that the indigenous messenger has given his loyalty to the Spanish captain, the new leader after the conquest of Tenochtitlán. Furthermore, now that Cortés has Mexicalcingo under his thumb, it is likely that if the Amerindian got wind of anything that could endanger his new leader, he would inform the Spanish captain directly. And this is exactly what he does in the

2. Interestingly, Mexicalcingo is a generic word meaning "from Mexica." The fact that Cortés does not know his informant's given name suggests that he does not value the Amerindian as an individual human being, but merely as a tool.

Quinta carta-relación. In this way, Cortés constructs a trustworthy, loyal, and most importantly, credible witness for his royal reader.

But in the *Decimatercia relación*, Mexicalcingo does not approach Cortés with information about the rebellion; instead it is Cortés who requires documentation. The conquistador's request for the *dibujo* is provoked by an episode he witnessed. This suggests that the captain invented the indigenous leaders' treacherous plan, and he sought evidence to support his suspicions (Restall 152). According to Alva, Cortés sees the indigenous nobles chatting and joking amongst themselves one night on the trip to Hibueras. During this gathering, the leaders mock themselves and their unhappiness at being subjugated (Ixtlilxóchitl 501). Since Cortés does not speak their language, he must instead read their body language and behavior. Alva describes the captain's interpretation and reaction:

[v]isto por Cortés a los señores muy contentos, y que pasaban entre ellos muchos razonamientos y burlerías imaginó mal, y como dice el proverbio, piensa el ladrón que todos son de su condición, díjoles por lengua de intérprete, que parecía muy mal entre los señores y grandes príncipes burlarse los unos con los otros, que les rogaba que no lo hiciesen otra vez. (502)

The nobles attempt to explain their behavior to Cortés via an interpreter, denying the negative intentions that he attributes to them and explaining that they are letting off steam and thus setting a non-violent example for their soldiers. But it is evident that the captain does not believe this explanation, because during the night he "secretamente" calls Mexicalcingo to give him another version of the event (502). According to the indigenous histories and paintings that Alva consulted while writing the *Decimatercia relación*, the indigenous messenger "le dijo a Cortés lo que había pasado [...] y Cortés le mandó pintase *cuántos* eran en la plática, y que así pintó a nueve personas, mas que él no dijo lo que Cortés decía, que se querían alzar contra él y matarle a él y a todos los españoles" (502-03, my emphasis). In other words, Cortés does not ask *who* was there, but instead *how many* were there, which indicates that he had already decided that the *caciques* were guilty of planning treason. The *dibujo* simply functions as superficial proof to support this decision.

There are several possible explanations for his distrust. Lisa Voigt maintains that Cortés projects his own thoughts onto the indigenous leaders, reading their conduct as he would read his own and that of other European men. In this way, his interpretation of the event is "a projection or self-recognition, rather than a cross-cultural misunderstanding" (Voigt 13). María Vittoria Calvi similarly describes Cortés' decision not as a misinterpretation of the culture of the other, but as a "manipulación deliberada del mensaje" (632). According to Calvi, Cortés does not trust the official interpreter mentioned in the above quote, but instead turns to his spy, Mexicalcingo, because this method is "un circuito que le permite actuar con mayor libertad" (636). That is, the Spanish captain easily falsifies the Amerindian's message because aside from himself, no one else has heard or read it. Cortés meets secretly with Mexicalcingo and asks for a *dibujo* of *how many* noblemen participated in the talk. He does not ask what they discussed or why they were joking and laughing mockingly, because he has already decided that they were mocking him and planning an insurrection. This allows him to manipulate the information to serve as proof of his belief, which in turn justifies the execution of the leaders who threaten his absolute authority.

It is also important to note the role (or lack thereof) of the interpreter in this episode, both in Alva's and Cortés' texts. Surprisingly, the above quote is the only instance in the affair

when the mestizo historiographer mentions an interpreter, and he does so in an offhand manner. Cortés, on the other hand, never mentions an interpreter in the episode of the massacre.³ Nor is there an interpreter present during the private conversation between Cortés and Mexicalcingo in either of the two versions of the event. However, since Alva does mention an interpreter in the discussion about the *caciques'* questionable joking, it is logical to suppose that one would also be necessary for Cortés and Mexicalcingo to verbally communicate during their secret meeting. But neither Alva nor Cortés explicitly indicates that this is the case.

In a study about the role of the interpreter in the *Cartas de relación*, David E. Johnson shows that by obscuring the presence of an interpreter, Cortés fulfills two goals. First, he eliminates the possibility of misunderstandings or miscommunication between the Spanish and the indigenous that could arise from the linguistic errors of an interpreter, who may speak both languages badly (Johnson 411). Misinterpretation is one of the most common preoccupations among colonial historiographers; the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, for example, complains about the horrible translations of an indigenous peasant in his *Historia general del Perú*, and in *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*, Bernal Díaz del Castillo comments on several undertakings that failed due to language problems (411). However, while in the *Cartas de relación* Cortés implies a direct and clear line of communication with the indigenous when he leaves out the interpreters, Johnson understands this omission differently. By minimizing the role of the interpreter, Cortés achieves his second goal: “[he] falsifies his *place* in the discourse, writing the interpreter out of the communicative structure and situating himself discursively closer to the Amerindian interlocutor” (402). In this way, he locates himself in the perfect position to receive the truth directly from the mouths of the Amerindians (409).

This discursive place also shows that any confession that arises from the secret meeting has been elicited by Cortés himself, who utilizes the information to make decisions and take violent action. Based on this reading, we can say that because Alva also chooses not to reveal the interpreter’s presence in the secret conversation between Cortés and Mexicalcingo, he implicitly blames the Spanish captain for the unjust execution of the indigenous nobles (Calvi 637). In this way, both authors place the burden of communication squarely upon Cortés, and between Cortés and Mexicalcingo. But although Cortés does this in order to justify the mass executions to the king, Alva does so in order to criticize the same action, revealing that the *caciques* were indeed innocent.

Ironically, Alva also uses this same strategy of omission in order to construct the hero’s role in his narrative. This hero is his grandfather, Ixtlilxóchitl, a Texcocan military leader who aided Cortés in the conquest of Tenochtitlán, and who also describes Mexicalcingo as a spy. Alva alters his grandfather’s discursive position in the massacre episode by obscuring the interpreter’s communicative function between Cortés and Ixtlilxóchitl, which in turn places Ixtlilxóchitl closer to the Spanish captain (Johnson 402). Throughout Alva’s account of the massacre episode, Ixtlilxóchitl speaks directly to Cortés without an interpreter, and with the complete absence of linguistic complications. The other indigenous leaders, in contrast to Ixtlilxóchitl, do need the interpreter’s help to communicate with Cortés. By constructing a close relationship between the two leaders, Spanish and Texcocan, Alva emphasizes Ixtlilxóchitl’s vital role in the Spanish conquest of Mexico, accentuating his ancestor’s indispensability to his

3. Other historians such as Bernal Díaz del Castillo, unlike Cortés, “remark on the presence of interpreters because intercultural communication took place only through them; interpreters/translators occupied the most prominent place in the structure of discourse” (Johnson 406).

intended reader, the Spanish king, in order to better argue for the restitution of rights and powers to the Texcocan elite.⁴ These elite, he indicates in his *relación*, have always been loyal to the Spanish crown and thus deserve rewards.

Although the figure of an official interpreter is absent during most of Alva's account of the massacre, Ixtlilxóchitl fulfills this role in the new discursive space created by his historiographer grandson. According to Calvi, in this position the Texcocan *cacique* acts as a mediator between Cortés and the other indigenous peoples, including both members of the travelling party and the indigenous they encounter on the journey (628). He is not only a translator on a linguistic level, but on a cultural level as well. Indigenous *caciques* in colonial histories who undertake mediating and conciliatory roles like Ixtlilxóchitl, Calvi explains, "proporcionan a los conquistadores importantes noticias sobre la realidad local e intenta[n] vencer la hostilidad de sus propios súbditos para con los extranjeros" (628). Ixtlilxóchitl's role as cultural intermediary facilitates communication between the Spanish and the indigenous troops. Moreover, translating and making understandable the motivations and customs of the other's culture in order to prevent conflict can be a more difficult and delicate operation than straightforward linguistic translation. Alva constructs his grandfather in this manner to raise his profile and to demonstrate his value to the *relación's* royal reader.

Returning to Cortés' *relación*, the Spanish conquistador himself also conducts a cultural translation involving the indigenous text's characteristics. We must not forget the importance of the duality of Mexicalcingo's message. In fact, both in the *Decimatercia relación* and in the *Quinta carta-relación*, the authors underline the fact that the *dibujo* is inseparable from its accompanying oral explanation. In the *Quinta carta-relación*, Cortés acknowledges this duality when he reports that Mexicalcingo "trajo cierta figura en un papel de lo de su tierra; y queriéndome dar a entender lo que significaba, me *dijo que* [los señores indígenas decían...] que sería bien que buscasen algún remedio para que ellos las tornasen a señorear y poseer [sus tierras]" (236-37, my emphasis). This quote shows that the captain realizes that orality is an integral and indispensable part of indigenous texts: Mexicalcingo brings him the *dibujo*, and he orally explains it so Cortés will "entender lo que significaba" (236). This not only demonstrates Cortés' understanding of the indigenous way of reading paintings; but it is also a tacit admission that he does not know how to read such texts. For this reason he must listen to Mexicalcingo's account, conceding interpretive authority to the Amerindian. Cortés utilizes the double format, oral and written, of the indigenous text to construct the correctness of his decision to hang the *caciques* he believes are guilty of planning an insurrection.

On the other hand, Cortés also considers the *dibujo* itself (without the oral testimony) according to Western European tradition, as a "container of truth" (Boone 248). As the colonial art historian Elizabeth Hill Boone explains, during the colonial period, indigenous paintings were commonly used in court as evidence in disputes over property and inheritances, among other cases. Both the indigenous and the Spanish trusted in their accuracy and were satisfied with their use as legal evidence. According to dominant views of that time period, the *dibujos* "guarantee the authenticity of what was spoken" within the legal context (21 – 22).⁵

Cortés combines this traditional European interpretation with the indigenous reading discussed above: he recognizes the existence and indispensability of indigenous texts' oral

4. The binomial "Cortés e Ixtlilxóchitl," which appears repeatedly in Alva's text, emphasizes Ixtlilxóchitl's complete indispensability during the conquest (Voigt 9).

component when he discloses that Mexicalcingo verbally relates the *dibujo's* message (Cortés 236). This explanation, as in the juridical context, functions within the situation constructed by Cortés as a testimony elaborated on the basis of a fixed document. Thus the *dibujo* corroborates Mexicalcingo's testimony while at the same time the oral message confirms the evidence presented in the *dibujo*. In his double manipulation of the *dibujo*, therefore, Cortés shows he has made his decision to hang the *caciques* using several processes, both of which legitimate the execution in his eyes. However, the king may not be so easily convinced. Although Cortés' deferral to Mexicalcingo may seem to exemplify an objective interpretation of the data contained in the *dibujo*, it also shows that Cortés is dependent on his informant, a common soldier, to maintain a tenuous control over indigenous people that he did not have royal permission to subjugate in the first place. In addition, he curiously gives credence and even preference to an indigenous interpretation.

In the *Decimatercia relación*, the *dibujo* also functions as proof of the *cacique's* guilt, but with a key difference: its reliability eventually is undermined through the later torture and confession of Mexicalcingo. At the moment of the execution, however, Ixtlilxóchitl has no other resource but the *dibujo* with which to prove or disprove Cortés' allegations. Alva explains the tense situation when Ixtlilxóchitl discovers that Cortés has hanged nine *caciques*, including his brother, Cohuanacochtzin. The Spanish captain seizes control of the oral component of the *dibujo*, offering his own explanation to Ixtlilxóchitl:

empezó a rogar a Ixtlilxóchitl que lo oyese que le quería dar la razón por qué había hecho aquello [...] Oyó atentamente Ixtlilxóchitl a Cortés, el cual *le dio la pintura que pintó Coztemexi* [Mexicalcingo], y le dijo que Quauhtémoc y Cohuanacochtzin y los demás señores los querían matar a él y demás españoles [...] las cuales oídas por Ixtlilxóchitl, aunque con harta pena se apaciguó, acordándose de muchas cosas y de la fe que tenía recibida, que haciendo él otra cosa se perdería todo y la ley evangélica no pasaría adelante, y sería causa de muchas guerras. (503, my emphasis)

Although his brother's death is painful to Ixtlilxóchitl, he decides to accept Cortés' defense for two explicit reasons cited in the quote above: he does not wish to start another war; and he has converted to Catholicism. Alva emphasizes his grandfather's firm religious faith, which in turn highlights the moral superiority of Ixtlilxóchitl over the cruel Cortés (Calvi 629). But also implicit in the "muchas cosas" informing his decision is his acknowledgement of Mexicalcingo's *dibujo* as proof of the *caciques'* rebellious plan. In the difficult moment in which he must make his decision, Ixtlilxóchitl takes the *dibujo* seriously because he does not have any other means at hand to uncover more evidence. Like Cortés in the *Quinta carta-relación*, Alva's grandfather accepts the *dibujo's* legal role as evidence in the case against the *caciques*.

Alva, however, is not as willing as his grandfather to accept the authenticity of Cortés' oral explanation for the *dibujo*. Even before relating the confrontation between the two leaders, Ixtlilxóchitl and Cortés, in front of the occupied gallows, the mestizo historiographer destroys the *dibujo's* veracity. He explains that having returned to Texcoco, Ixtlilxóchitl tortures Mexicalcingo in order to discover what he said to Cortés during their secret meeting the night

5. We now understand, of course, that oral interpretation of indigenous *dibujos* is fluid. Each "reading" depends on the audience to whom the text was read. For example, after a dynastic change it was possible to read foundational histories of an *altepetl*, or village, in a way that would emphasize and praise the new leader while minimizing the role of the old ruler (Cañizarres-Esquerre 68).

before the executions. This torture reveals that “él no dijo lo que Cortés decía, que se querían alzar contra él y matarle a él y a todos los españoles, y así claro parece en las historias, pinturas y las demás relaciones y confesión de este indio” (503). He adds that Cortés asked him for a *dibujo* that specifically portrayed “cuántos eran en la plática, y que así pintó a nueve personas” (503). Thus Alva dismantles the painting’s credibility: it is merely a response to a specific leading question, not blanket proof of the *caciques’* treachery. Ironically, Alva reveals that he depends on “las historias, pinturas y las demás relaciones,” also indigenous texts whose circumstances of creation are unknown, in order to corroborate the content of this confession. But while Mexicalcingo’s painting depends on Cortés’ prompt for its existence, Alva implies that the texts he is using are more trustworthy, perhaps because they come from a variety of independent sources.

Cortés, on the other hand, never questions the veracity of the *dibujo* in the *Quinta carta-relación*. In fact, as is revealed during his secret meeting with Mexicalcingo, he believes that none of the indigenous troops know how he has learned of the planned rebellion. He explains to the king that as a result of the meeting, they now “creen que lo sup[o] por alguna arte, y así piensan que ninguna cosa se [l]e puede esconder” (237). Here he verbally reiterates that he maintains control over the recently conquered indigenous peoples. It is doubtful, however, that Cortés truly believes that the indigenous fear his magical powers, because this secret depends upon the silence of Mexicalcingo. Although the indigenous messenger is loyal to the Spanish captain, it would be very difficult to hide either the *dibujo* or the meeting from the rest of the group. In any case, whether magically or politically, Cortés believes he has reinforced his control over the conquered indigenous, who now fear his anger and violent nature. What he does not openly admit is that the hangings may have the opposite result: the indigenous troops may be even more inclined to rebel against this foreign leader who resorts to devious assassinations to maintain power. Thus it is possible that Cortés, instead of reinforcing his control, has actually undermined it.

The superficial conformities in the *Decimatercia relación* and the *Quinta carta-relación* hide essential differences. These are found in the protagonist Cortés’ reading or interpretation of the indigenous painting, which he utilizes to support his decision to assassinate the *caciques*, and the justification each author offers for such a violent act. In the *Quinta carta-relación*, Cortés justifies his actions to the king, constructing a situation in which an independent outside source, Mexicalcingo, has revealed to him in several ways the sinister plan of the indigenous leaders, a treasonous act that demands punishment (237). Utilizing the indigenous system of interpretation, he accepts as authoritative the accompanying oral account provided by the Amerindian artist. Manipulating this oral reading, along with Western notions of document as legal evidence, Cortés legitimates his violent act to the king. Based upon the apparently objective information in the *dibujo*, Cortés attempts to show that his decision is both just and inevitable, and the only way in which to reestablish control over the indigenous people. However, his action may only have succeeded in angering and unsettling the Amerindians, undermining his control even more.

In the *Decimatercia relación*, on the other hand, Cortés acts during each step of the decision process. Alva profiles a Spanish captain who manipulates the situation from beginning to end, from the *dibujo* to the punishment. It is not a simple case of misunderstanding; Cortés understands exactly what Mexicalcingo has drawn because he has requested specific information: the number of indigenous leaders in the insurgent gathering. This is a “manipulación deliberada del mensaje” in order to justify his desire to assassinate his rivals and

demonstrate his importance to the king's project in the New World (Calvi 632). He extends this deliberate manipulation by appropriating Mexicalcingo's spoken explanation, recounting and embellishing the picture's content in order to convince Ixtlilxóchitl of the *caciques'* guilt. Thus when Ixtlilxóchitl questions the execution of the nobles, Cortés uses Mexicalcingo's *dibujo* and his verbal account to defend himself. And because Cortés appears to be reading the *dibujo* according to Ixtlilxóchitl's cultural norms, the *cacique* is even less able to question the conquistador's decision. In this way, Alva shows the king that his grandfather was loyal to Cortés for the duration of the conquest conflicts, even though he may have questioned the Spanish captain's decision in the massacre incident. By proving the *cacique's* unwavering loyalty, Alva hopes the king will reward the Texcocans by reinstating their land and political power.

In spite of these vital differences, "the events surrounding [the *caciques'*] death[s] illustrate the fact that accurate translation between Spanish and native tongues was less important than the communication of intent and interest" (Restall 155). This "communication of intent" is reflected both in the *Decimatercia relación* and in the *Quinta carta-relación*. Although there are striking discrepancies between the two massacre accounts, both authors attribute the same motivation to the protagonist Cortés' decision to hang the *caciques*: he seeks to eliminate the threat of a possible uprising provoked by indigenous nobles dissatisfied with their new subordinate role. This mutual understanding resulted in two very different retellings to the same reader.

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