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# Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance

## Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico

Edited by William H. Beezley  
Cheryl English Martin  
William E. French



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*To*  
*Paul, John, and Mark Beezley*  
*Jeff Martin*  
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## Abbreviations

AAAM	Archivo del Antiguo Ayuntamiento de México, Mexico City
Actas	<i>Actas de cabildo de la ciudad de México</i> (México: Aguilar e Hijos, 1889-1911)
AGI	Archivo General de Indias, Seville
AGN	Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City
APD	Archivo de Porfirio Díaz, Mexico City
CSSH	<i>Comparative Studies in Society and History</i>
HAHR	<i>Hispanic American Historical Review</i>
HM	<i>Historia Mexicana</i>
JCH	<i>Journal of Contemporary History</i>
JLAS	<i>Journal of Latin American Studies</i>
LARR	<i>Latin American Research Review</i>
PO	<i>Periódico Oficial</i>
PP	<i>Past and Present</i>
SEP/AH	Secretaría de Educación Pública, Archivo Histórico, Mexico City

## Introduction: Constructing Consent, Inciting Conflict

William H. Beezley

Cheryl English Martin

William E. French

Successful rulers throughout history have understood that their dominion rests on much more than force alone. Persuasion, charisma, habit, and presentations of virtue serve as familiar techniques and exhibitions of authority. In particular, those in power have grasped the crucial importance of public ritual in symbolizing and constantly recreating their hegemony. Not only do ceremonies and processions provide visual and aural dramas of the society's hierarchy, but they also afford elites an opportunity to reiterate for their own edification and that of their subordinates the moral values on which their authority rests. Such occasions also may shape interpretations of the society's past, mask social divisions by seeming to unite disparate groups in shared ritual, and provide opportunities for popular revelry that may defuse the potentially disruptive impulses of subordinate groups. Thus, many rituals rehearsing religious premises and celebrating milestones in royal lives have yielded to analogous civic and secular holidays that continue to consolidate state authority and represent power to its subjects. 1

From their first arrival in the Western Hemisphere, Spaniards used rituals to help establish their authority. In contrast to the English, for example, who relied on the architectural symbolism of residences (usually building houses), the Spaniards legitimated their right to rule through language and ceremony. The relevance of ritual appeared clearly from 1512 onward in the acts of possession, because the Spaniards used the ceremonial *requerimiento* (a document, read aloud, that supposedly justified the imposition of Spanish sovereignty) to establish authority over persons, not property or trade. "Spanish colonialism," in Patricia Seed's phrase, "produced the census, British colonialism the map."<sup>2</sup> Spanish rulers required subject peoples to reiterate and reaffirm Spanish hegemony on a regular basis.

In Mexico, from the first encounter of the Spaniards and the Aztecs, visual displays of the desired new society with its hierarchy of authority and status dominated the cultural interaction of these peoples. <sup>3</sup> Holiday celebrations offered civic and church leaders the opportunity to organize living tableaux of virtue that served to instruct subordinate peoples. Spanish efforts to acculturate, especially to evangelize, the indigenous peoples focused on dramatic demonstrations such as rituals of government, passion plays, and Amerindian dances revised to carry Christian-European meanings. Mexico's Spanish festival heritage began with the arrival of Cortés and quickly became a unique visual, acoustic, and symbolic tradition that combined Spanish and indigenous, and some African, images and icons. In the last third of the colonial era, the Bourbon monarchs attempted to reform colonial societies in many ways, including efforts to remove the carnivalesque features of popular celebrations and give them a more formal and serious character.

These changes of the eighteenth century continued and assumed a more explicitly political character immediately after independence, when patriotic Mexicans instituted holidays and celebrations that honored the heroes of independence and attempted to make colonial residents into citizens of an emerging nation-state. Emperor Agustín de Iturbide and the first congress devised an official list of these holidays that established a celebration to honor the victims of the independence struggle, the entry of the patriotic army into the capital, and the emperor's birthday. This calendar also maintained the celebration of San Hipólito Day, marking Cortés's conquest of the Aztec capital.<sup>4</sup> Changes and additions, of course, continued after independence. The revolution revised many local celebrations and added new festivities that continue to the present. A 1977 survey reported that communities celebrate 5,083 civil and religious occasions throughout the year in which no more than nine days go by without a fiesta somewhere in Mexico.<sup>5</sup> The following essays consider public ritual in Mexico over five centuries. In one way or another, all of the authors focus on symbolic dramatizations of state power and responses of intended audiences to these rituals, and some authors also pay explicit attention to the arenas in which these ceremonial displays took place.

Rituals of rule and resistance have been recognized and studied in many regions outside of Mexico. In one celebrated example, state ceremony, rather than serving as a means to a political end, expressed the end itself. Clifford Geertz, in an analysis of what he calls the theater-state, argues that Bali's great rituals—royal cremation, noble suicides, tooth filings, temple dedications,

penitential pilgrimages, and blood sacrifices become the media for rulers to act out the drama

of their power rather than to administer their realm. Balinese rulers employed the rhetoric of ritual to present the tenets of their political thought that status is the basis of power and that statecraft is a thespian art and to express their view of the nature of reality and thus make it actual. As Geertz adduces, "The king owned the country as he ruled it mimetically; composing and constructing the very thing he imitated." <sup>6</sup> Rulers try to create a compliant, imagined reality that will be accepted by subjects. <sup>7</sup> Rituals establish just such virtual, compliant representations of reality because they portray the idealized social relations envisioned by those in power. Such understanding rests on the assumption that ritual actions can be read as statements because they are less cluttered and more focused in purpose than daily life and therefore more articulate.

At the same time, scholars have demonstrated that daily life is suffused with ritual performances that supposedly reinforce existing social hierarchies. Rhys Isaac explained this precept of much cultural history when he defined culture as the multichanneled system of communication comprising language, gesture, demeanor, dress, and architecture. <sup>8</sup> Thus society emerges as a series of images that participants have of their own and others' performances. Architectural design and church seating arrangements, for example, serve as pronouncements of social order and the expression of social ranking. At the center of Isaac's work is his concern with authority and deference in social relationships and the many ways they are asserted, communicated, recognized and contested. In face-to-face communities like those of eighteenth-century Virginia and, until recently, Mexico, action (that is, physical movement) in a social context proved more articulate in total communication than speech and written words. Most authors in the present volume share the preoccupation with power and view action as statement. Studies of brass bands, drunken scandals, civic parades, street monuments, and village fiestas provide opportunities not only to gain access to the mentalities of past peoples but also to probe these activities in order to reveal them as representations that both assert and contest power. <sup>9</sup>

Symbolic properties make ritual a forceful medium for representing authority and facilitating rule. Geertz's discussion of the Balinese theater-state makes apparent the capacity of ritual to model desired ends. While symbols, with their layers of meaning in condensed form, allow for immediate communication, they also evoke sensual as well as intellectual responses. Ritual relates the individual to the collective by joining the emotional to the

ideological. From an elite perspective, then, ritual works by fusing the positive emotions of symbols and events with social and moral demands on the subject.<sup>10</sup> In other words, social norms and values acquire greater force by being

invested with emotion while basic emotions are ennobled through association with social values. Discussing the role of ritual in enabling rule in the erstwhile Soviet Union, a manager of state ceremonies revealed: "Rituals are conducted at important turning-points of a man's life. Owing to psychic mood he is particularly receptive to external influence [that] we must utilize in the interests of communist education." 11

While rituals fusing the individual to the collective often revolve around rites of initiation or passage, they also can portray the past to the present. Just as initiation rites represent an interpenetration of social norms and individual emotions, commemorative rites strengthen the present by reference to the past. David Cannadine, for example, charts the transformation in the meaning and performance of British royal ritual from 1820 to the present. Rather unimportant at the beginning of this period, between 1918 and 1953 British monarchs came to represent a manufactured "thousand-year-old" tradition. Cannadine notes that those persons watching carefully orchestrated displays of royal pageantry, with commentators stressing the real or putative historic continuity with those former days of Britain's greatness, find it difficult to believe that such greatness has vanished.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the British monarchy best exemplified this practice, but other commemorative rites have figured prominently in the rituals used by rulers as disparate as those of Nazi Germany and the former Soviet Union, and surely include the leaders of the Spanish colonial empire and the Mexican republic.

The authors in this volume analyze the importance of ritual in Mexico from the sixteenth through the twentieth century. Linda Curcio-Nagy (Chapter 1) and Clara García Ayluardo (Chapter 4) vividly describe and evaluate the exuberantly baroque ceremonial life of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that haphazardly mingled political symbols of Hapsburg state power, religious rituals of the Counter-Reformation, and popular traditions of both Iberian and indigenous peoples. Although colonial rituals graphically depicted and even celebrated distinctions of class, estate, ethnicity, and gender, they also stressed even the humblest individual's membership in the mystical body of Christ and his or her rhetorically filial relationship to His Majesty.<sup>13</sup> The Bourbon monarchs of the eighteenth century attempted to streamline public celebrations in Mexico and utilized these occasions for unabashed assertions of state power, as Sergio Rivera Ayala (Chapter 2), Susan Deans-Smith (Chapter 3), and Cheryl English Martin (Chapter 5) amply explain.

In the decades that followed independence in 1821, Mexican leaders faced the challenge of creating new vocabularies of ritual for an emerging national state. It was here, in the Americas, as Benedict



Anderson has demonstrated, that the imagined community of the nation-state first appeared along with republican institutions, common citizenships, and popular sovereignty. And it was ritual that provided one means of facilitating the transfer of allegiances from older, more established imaginary communities based on religion, family, and region to the new nation-state. 14 Conflicts with the church, war with the United States, the Liberal triumph in the Revolution of Ayutla in 1854, and resistance to the French Intervention of the 1860s all furnished new symbols of national solidarity: a flag, a national anthem, and a gallery of heroes that could be immortalized in place and street names and proudly heralded on ritual occasions. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Porfirio Díaz and his supporters continued to build and consolidate a ritual repertoire appropriate to the modernized, centralized state they were creating. They constructed impressive monuments, as Barbara Tenenbaum's essay (Chapter 7) shows, that handsomely portrayed the figures and ideals of liberalism. Meanwhile, they also staged increasingly elaborate pageants of state, culminating in the celebrations held in 1910 to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of Mexican independence and to convince invited dignitaries from around the world that Mexico deserved a place in the ranks of civilized and progressive nations.<sup>15</sup>

Political leaders of twentieth-century Mexico have created a new iconography incorporating the accepted heroes of the Revolution of 1910 as well as a political culture that underscores their own self-defined roles as the effective successors of those heroes.<sup>16</sup> On occasion the postrevolutionary elites have also augmented the ritual vocabulary. Lázaro Cárdenas's expropriation of the foreign oil properties on March 18, 1938, gave Mexicans a new holiday and a new slogan ("*El petróleo es nuestro*") of national solidarity. In less spectacular ways the political leaders of Mexico also built an elaborate infrastructure capable of recapitulating on a daily basis the messages more dramatically conveyed on ritual occasions. Public schools, a nationwide network of museums and cultural centers that make Mexico's history and artistic achievements accessible to a wider public, and a political party that claims to encircle all Mexicans in its paternal embrace: each of these institutions performs functions similar to those of the viceregal and religious processions in the colonial era. Like their predecessors they offer certain benefits, although social security and subsidized housing have replaced spiritual indulgences and coins tossed by passing dignitaries.

Mexico's rulers of the late twentieth century continue to follow established

rituals of proven patriotic worth. Thus, each year on the night of September 1516, the president of the republic appears on the balcony of the National Palace overlooking Mexico City's

majestic central plaza, called the Zócalo. Wearing the red, white, and green sash of office that represents his direct continuity with the past, he commemorates Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla's original call to arms that ignited the struggle for independence in 1810. One by one he invokes the names of Father Hidalgo and other heroes, including President Benito Juárez and the Niños Heroes de Chapultepec, the young cadets who reportedly plunged to their deaths rather than surrender to the invading North Americans in 1847. The crowd greets each new incantation with an exuberant "Viva!" until finally the president ends the litany with a resounding "Viva México!"

Although the ceremony creates the illusion of continuity between the present and the founding of the country, changes in the manner of its celebration reveal abrupt breaks with the past. Before the Juárez presidency the *grito*, given in the reduced space of a theater on the night of September 15, served not as the central focus of the Independence ceremonies but rather as an elite event overshadowed by the popular activities, including cockfights and fireworks, that took place the following day. During the rule of Díaz not only did the *grito* itself become central, but also the ceremony afforded an opportunity for the president to insinuate himself into the pantheon of national heroes as the country began to celebrate his saint's day on September 15.<sup>17</sup> More recently, the Independence Day celebrations also demonstrate that Mexico's leaders have proved adept at using modern technology to dramatize their message and diffuse it to a wider audience. Brilliant, multicolored lighting illuminates the Zócalo as crowds assemble to hear the president's message, while satellite hookups stand ready to beam his image and words to Mexicans throughout the republic and abroad.

In Mexico, rulers have invented tradition and presented it as having passed down unchanged from generation to generation. Here, as elsewhere, the last two hundred years in general, and situations of rapid social and economic change in particular, have provided propitious occasions for the creation of such "tradition." As societies stratified by rank or estate were replaced by those divided along class lines, and as nation-states became increasingly secular in outlook, new methods of ensuring loyalty and acceptance of state power emerged. Colonial outposts gave way to independent nations, and the host of presidents, emperors, and praetorian dictators required affirmation of their rule and confirmation of their state.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps no one in the early independence period was of greater importance in inventing tradition and perpetuating national myths than Carlos María de Bustamante. Between 1821

and 1827 he provided the new republic with a "portrait gallery of its founding fathers" and conjured up the image of a Mexican nation that had existed at the time of the