

Barthes in Post-Colonial Guatemala: Dismantling the National Hero

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National symbols often represent the desired values of a nation. Usually, these symbols represent values such as: victory, bravery, strength, beauty, and power. In countries like Guatemala, however, symbols, such as the national hero, portray a different set of values. Tecún Umán, rather than portraying the traditional characteristics of a hero, represents the story of a fallen warrior killed by the dagger of his colonizer. Why then, would a country like Guatemala name this figure the national hero? Furthermore, what can this hero, this national symbol, tell us about the state of affairs and national identity of the Guatemalan people? In this essay, I will argue that the myth of the national hero in Guatemala exists not as an innocent banal story, but as a myth that reinforces and perpetuates colonial values that have shaped the country for more than three hundred years. Moreover, I will argue that the myth of the national hero goes unquestioned mainly because the values that it promotes have already been taken as natural and universal by its people who are still divided between the Maya and the Ladinos. To demonstrate this, and to uncover the function of this symbol, I will rely on Roland Barthes' theoretical analysis of myth in his essay, "Myth Today." Particularly, I will analyze the myth of Tecún Umán through Barthes' main insight that explains that the role of myth is to "transforms history into nature" (Barthes 129). This, which Barthes explains through linguistics, will be the model by which I will explore the many layers of meaning within this myth. Moreover, I will draw parallels between Bathes' understanding of the bourgeoisie in France and the economic role they play in perpetuating their own values, to the Ladinos in Guatemala and their unique way of infiltrating their values into the economic system. Lastly, it is my wish that this analysis can bring new insights into the different initiatives that seek to create a post-colonial imaginary in Guatemala.

I. "Myth Today"

In his book *Mythologies*, Barthes argues that myth can be anything from a box of soap detergent (objects), to the cover of a magazine (images), to a sentence written in a grammar book. For him, what is characteristic of myth is not its content but its form: "myth is a type of speech, everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse. Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message" (Barthes 109). This means that for him, any object, any symbol, any hero, any story, any image, etc. can be a myth provided it is a part of discourse. Moreover, Barthes describes 'discourse' as that which is relevant or significant at a certain point in time. It is important to remember that for Barthes language and discourse are not expressions of things-in-themselves, essences or natural objects. Contrary to this, Barthes argues that myth "can only have a historical foundation...it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things" (110). Because language cannot be understood from an essentialist perspective, myth as discourse can only be understood historically and formally. It is for this reason that Barthes turns to linguistics, specifically to Saussure's semiotics, to further understand mythology.

Barthes used Saussure's semiotics as the means to understand the role of myth even though he also criticized it. Barthes admired the way semiotics provided a scientific framework for linguistics as well as Saussure's understanding of language in formal terms. However, even though Barthes relied mostly on semiotics to understand myth, he also believed that semiotics could not explain the way in which certain concepts were a part of discourse while others were not. To explain this issue, Barthes argued that myth is a "*metalanguage*, because it is a second language, *in which one* speaks about the first" (Barthes 115). This means that for Barthes, language becomes myth and discourse only when it reaches a second order of signification. He argued that myth is divided into two levels of signification: a first order system and a second order system.

The first order system, for Barthes, can be understood through Saussure's semiotics and his fundamental concept of the sign. Saussure argued that a sign, or a word, has two distinct parts: the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the acoustic image, the sound of the word itself (form), while the signified is the concept (content) that the signifier refers back

to. Together, the signifier and the signified make the sign, or the word which correlates the image with the concept. For Barthes, for a sign to become a myth, it must reach a new and more complex level of signification. In order to do this, the sign has to enter a second order of signification. In this new level, the sign becomes a signifier, signaling to a new concept. Barthes argues that this new signifier, which is now both content and form, is ambiguous because it both retains the meaning that it previously had as a sign in the first order system as well as acquires the form of the signifier, which is an empty form that lacks meaning in itself. This, according to him, reveals the function of myth: to distance, defer or distort meaning.

In order to explain this idea, Barthes provides an example of a sentence found in a grammar book. He notices that the sentence in the book, which is there to explain a grammatical rule, is not just any French sentence, but rather a Latin sentence from an ancient poet. He realizes that even when he translates the sentence, this translation is not enough to expose all the meanings that the sentence carries. He claims that from the linguistic point of view, it would be enough to understand just the literal meaning of the sentence. However, from the mythologist's point of view, the literal meaning of the sentence is secondary or distanced from the real meaning of the sentence. For him, what is revelatory about this example is that the real meaning of the sentence is that the sentence itself is in the book, in order to explain a grammatical rule as well as to convey a value about the importance that is given to classical Literature in France at that time. This, for Barthes, is the new signification that the sign, or the sentence, acquires when it reaches the level of myth and metalanguage.

In other words, Barthes explains that in order to understand myth, the mythologist must also take into account the fact that myth "is filled with a situation" that "must appeal to such and such group of readers and not another" (119). This, for him, ultimately provides an answer as to why language becomes a myth and a part of discourse. He realized that in order to understand a myth, the mythologist had to understand the intention, the set of values and the ideology that contextualizes the myth at a particular group at a particular time in history. However, he observed that in the same way as the middle term between the two chains of signification concealed the meaning of the sign; he also noticed that the ambiguous nature of this middle term obscured the value or intention of the sign, which created the mystic or 'mythological feel' of the sign. Moreover, it is because of this ambiguity of the middle term,

that is both content and form, that it both defers the meaning and the value of the sign. Barthes made myth appear universal, natural, without intention and, ultimately, innocent.

Finally, for Barthes, a word, a sentence, a whole book or an image could be understood as one myth. In myth, “a whole book may be the signifier of a single concept; and conversely, a minute form (a word, a gesture, even incidental, so long as it is noticed) can serve as signifier to a concept filled with a very large history” (Barthes 120). For the most part, the terms in the first-order system are numerically proportional to each other; in one sign, there is one signifier and one signified. In the second order-system, or the level of myth, this ratio can differ. According to Barthes, myth is different because of the various forms it can take. These include but are not limited to a narration, an image, an object or a gesture. For instance, a myth that is a narration and composed of different signs can have all of these signs point to the same concept. In this case, Barthes says that the mythologist should search for the sum of these signs or the “global sign” in order to find the signification of the myth (115). Thus, for Barthes, the way the mythologist must understand myth is through a careful analysis of the proliferation, repetition, and insistence of the same concept disguised in different shapes and forms.

II. The Myth of Tecún Umán

The myth of the Mayan prince, Tecún Umán, is the myth of the Guatemalan national hero. Every year on the 20th of February, people in Guatemala gather to celebrate him. Interestingly enough, almost no one ever questions the reasons why Tecún Umán is the national hero, given that he is known for being defeated by the Spanish colonizers. The myth is strange, not only because it celebrates the loss of the Mayan community to the Spaniards, but also because it is celebrated in a country where most people are Mayan and the minorities are Ladinos (people of European descent). Moreover, it is strange that he is celebrated, because Tecún Umán not only lost the battle, but he was also portrayed as ignorant in the story.

The myth of the Guatemalan hero goes as follows: Tecún Umán, a Mayan prince, meets the Spanish conquistador, Pedro de Alvarado, in the battlefield. There, Tecún Umán

attempts to kill Alvarado by stabbing Alvarado's horse. The myth tells us that Tecún Umán punctures Alvarado's horse because he thought that the horse and the man were one beast. This, according to the story, is because prior to Spanish colonization, people in the Americas had not been exposed to horses. Once Tecún Umán wounds the horse, Alvarado takes this opportunity and kills Tecún Umán by thrusting a spear through his heart. At that moment, Tecún Umán's *nahual*,¹ the *quetzal*,² or animal spirit, lies on top of the prince and paints his chest with blood. It is believed that this is the reason why all *quetzals* bear a red chest. The myth also states that the reason why Tecún Umán and his army lose to the Spaniards is because the Spaniards had 'superior' intelligence and weapons.

This myth is the birth of two important nationalistic symbols in Guatemala: the national hero and the national bird. The hero not only has his own holiday but is also represented by the many statues that decorate the city. The *quetzal* inscribes significance onto other nationalistic symbols in Guatemala such as the emblem of the flag, the national anthem, the name of Guatemala's currency, etc. It is clear, thus, how this myth has taken many forms and thrived in its repetition, insistence, and many disguises. It is no surprise, then, that it is almost impossible for the people in Guatemala to overcome and question this myth and the set of values it portrays, since it has become a part of their daily life and their national identity.

III. Analysis of the Myth of Tecún Umán

The analysis of myth requires that the mythologist start his investigation by finding the global sign of the myth in the first-order system. In order to do this, the myth must be read in the same way that Barthes analyzes an image on the cover of a French magazine. Barthes describes in that particular image:

¹ Nahual: "Among some groups, each person has his/her own nahual acting as a double, a shadow, or protective spirit. Nahuals often are animals such as dogs, horses, opossums, or jaguars, or natural forces such as lightning or meteors. Should one harm another person's nahual, one may harm the person who belongs to that nahual, or at a minimum, make him/her very angry. One can send one's nahual out to perform a task, use it as an advisor, or even turn it into it by shifting one's shape from human to that of the nahual." (Read and González 216)

² Quetzal: Colorful bird that lives in the highlands of Guatemala. The male bird is known for having a red chest.

A young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolor. All this is the *meaning* of the picture. But, whatever naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any color discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so called oppressors (Barthes 116).

The “meaning” or the “global sign” in the first-order system renders the literal interpretation of myth. When Barthes analyzes the meaning of the myth on the cover of the magazine he does so by interpreting the image on its most literal level: “The Negro is giving the French salute” (Barthes 117). This interpretation of meaning is the full signification of the first-order sign which in turn will transform itself into the signifier, or form of the myth. In the myth of the Guatemalan national hero, the meaning of the myth can be expressed in the following way: Tecún Umán loses the battle to the Spaniard because he mistakenly assumes Alvarado will die after he punctures the horse with his spear.

The transition between chains of signification is the transition of meaning into form. This transition is an expression of “the very principle of myth” in which it “transforms history into nature” (Barthes 129). To begin the analysis, I will start by saying that “myth is a type of speech defined by its intention. . . . much more that by its literal sense. . . in spite of this, its intention is somehow frozen, purified, eternalized, made absent by its literal sense” (124). The intention of the myth expresses the set of values that shape the myth, which ultimately render the concept of the myth. In the first order system the sign renders the literal interpretation of the myth or the meaning of the sign. When this meaning becomes a form, the meaning is somehow “frozen.” The reason is that once meaning becomes form, it is treated as literal or factual, which makes the sign in the first-order system lose its arbitrariness, its artificiality. In the case of the Guatemalan hero, the signifier of the myth is the literal interpretation of the myth: Tecún Umán loses the battle to the Spaniards by confusing killing Alvarado’s horse as a way of killing Alvarado. When this sign becomes the form of the myth it postulates an obvious reading and its intentions are obscured. For this reason, the signifier becomes full on one side and empty on the other. On the one hand, the signifier or form of myth is full because it carries a meaning. On the other hand, the sign is empty because the meaning loses

its artificiality, the sense in which it was created, and belongs to a situation and a particular period in history.

The values which are contained in the concept of the myth are the values of those in power. In France, Barthes explains that these values come from those who control the economy: the bourgeoisie. In Guatemala, the situation is a little different. Those who have control of the economy are the Ladinos. Looking back at the analysis of the myth of the Guatemalan hero we can observe how the myth perpetuates colonial values. When Tecún Umán tries to murder Alvarado, this meaning becomes the signifier of the myth. The signifier points to the concept which, in this case, is a value that can be expressed as follows: *The European colonizers are superior to the Mayans because they supposedly have a greater understanding of the world.* In the myth of Tecún Umán, this value is signified twice. The first instance is when Tecún Umán loses to Pedro de Alvarado. He loses the war to Alvarado because he is unable to distinguish a man from a horse; he does not possess that knowledge. Moreover, the myth also narrates that the Spaniards' defeat the Mayans because they had more technologically advanced weapons. Here, we have another instance in which a different sign within the myth signifies the same value. Since we have found the value towards which all the different signs in the myth point, we can say that we have found the signification of the global sign of the myth of Tecún Umán: European man is naturally superior in intelligence and tactics than the Mayan people, who are depicted as ignorant.

In summary, the double function of the signifier in the second-order system is responsible for making myths and traditions in society appear natural. Moreover, this “natural” appearance gives myths the illusion of being eternal: “Semiology has taught us that myth has the task of giving a historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal” (Barthes 142). When the sign in the first-order system is transformed into the signifier in the second-order system, meaning becomes form. This transition is responsible for making “meaning” appear as literal and factual, which in turn empties the sign in the first-order system of its contingency (myth robs language). The signifier and signified in the first-order system have an arbitrary relationship to each other. This was one of Saussure’s greatest insights, which allowed him to move away from an essentialist view of language to a formal one. However, what this implies, which needs to be

emphasized, is that the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary for Saussure. This is important, as this demonstrates that meanings in language are fabricated. Although this was a great insight by Saussure, Barthes went further and argued that in the first-order system it is arbitrary, but in the second is not; in the second order-system the relationship between signifier and signified is filled with intention. However, because of the ambiguity of this middle term and the literal interpretation which is often given to language, the whole signification of the myth appears factual, natural.

The myth of the Guatemalan national hero defines the national identity of the country: “the same ‘natural’ varnish covers up all ‘national’ representations” (Barthes 141). This myth naturalizes the cultural dichotomy between the Ladinos and the Maya; where the Maya still hold the position of those who must be “civilized” by the Ladinos. Guatemala acquires most of its national symbols from the myth of Tecún Umán. For instance, the *quetzal* is a sign that exponentially propagates the values behind the myth. I had previously said that the *quetzal* is a bird which lies on Tecún Umán’s chest the moment he dies. Moreover, the bird becomes stained forever with blood, the symbol of Tecún Umán’s defeat. Barthes says: “This repetition of the concept through different forms is precious to the mythologist, it allows him to decipher the myth: it is the insistence of a kind of behavior which reveals its intention” (120). The repetition of the nationalistic symbols in Guatemala: the flag, the bird and the national hero, demonstrate the insistence and imposition of colonial values in Guatemala. The value of Ladino culture in Guatemala is propagated in the most bourgeois way. In Guatemala, one of the most effective ways in which the signification of the myth of Tecún Umán has been multiplied is through the country’s currency, the *quetzal* bill. The bill itself is named the *quetzal* and it is also filled with emblems of the bird and images of Tecún Umán. “The Ladino artist who designed the quetzal bill evidently knew his semiotics” (Perrera 271). The *quetzal* bill is the most efficient way in which people can encounter the signification of the myth of Tecún Umán daily. This is not only because it is used by everyone, but also because it forces people to agree upon its cryptic meaning with every transaction; trading not only material values but also the value of their identities. With this level of propagation and the nature of myth, it is no surprise that until this day people in Guatemala still perceive the myth of Tecún Umán as innocent and natural.

The Ladino culture in Guatemala resembles the bourgeois culture in France in that the bourgeoisie, “pervades France: practiced on a national scale, bourgeois norms are experienced as evident laws of natural order—the further the bourgeoisie class propagates its representations, the more naturalized they become” (Barthes 140). In Guatemala, the Ladinos are analogous to the French bourgeois. Ladino norms are seen as the model of natural order. Unfortunately, in Guatemala the order that pervades and is naturalized is not only economically advantaged, but also infused with colonial and racially oppressive values. The contemporary and common views of the Mayas in Guatemala are that in some way they are “subhuman” (Perrera 48). Until recently, Guatemala was in a civil war in which the Mayas were victims of a brutal genocide. Although the war started as an anti-communist attack, it is evident that colonial values and the social dichotomies in the country contributed to the violence against the Mayan communities. Years after the peace treaty in Guatemala, the dichotomies between the Mayans and the Ladinos still exist, and the myth of the Guatemalan hero is still unquestioned, which demonstrates the importance of an analysis of these issues.

In conclusion, Barthes provided a very deep analysis of the way myth shapes our ideas of reality. Through all its functions and intricate levels of signification, he argued that myth allows for the discourse of the ones in power to seem natural and universal. This was seen in the example of Tecún Umán, where the story of a fallen hero was clearly fabricated to oppress and define national identity. To this date, the values of this myth are still enacted and unquestioned in Guatemala, primarily because these values are still seen as part of the natural order. Thus, it is clear that Barthes’ project, and that of the mythologist, is not only urgent but desired in this type of situation. To de-naturalize, reevaluate, and overcome these values, the people of Guatemala must face their own history and understand how the values of their colonial “past” are still operative in the present through these symbols. Even though the process of overcoming these values in Guatemala will be long and arduous, I hope that this essay, in the very least, invites others to question and share their suspicion about the function of this tragic hero.

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