

Colonial Latin American Historical Review

Volume 6

Issue 2 *Volume 6, Issue 2, Spring 1997*

Article 4

4-1-1997

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Recommended Citation

Gerhard, Peter. "Abel A. Alves, Brutality and Benevolence: Human Ethology, Culture, and the Birth of Mexico." *Colonial Latin American Historical Review* 6, 2 (1997): 203. <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/clahr/vol6/iss2/4>

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Book Reviews

Brutality and Benevolence: Human Ethology, Culture, and the Birth of Mexico.
By Abel A. Alves. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996. xi + 247 pp.
Notes, bibliography, index. \$59.95 cloth.)

Abel Alves is a man with a mission. His purpose is "to extrapolate upon the learning factor and adaptive potential inherent in culture by trying to make us aware of our animal nature so that we might adapt our cultural traditions to promote the benevolent rather than the violent and agonistic" (p. 236). No one would deny that this is a noble ambition, but this reviewer doubts that it will have the desired effect.

After giving the deconstructionists their well-deserved comeuppance, Alves proposes to his American colleagues a way out of their current dilemma, the horns of which are Eurocentrism and multiculturalism. Discard both, he suggests, and substitute ethology, the study of animal behavior. He proceeds to apply this alternative "ism" to the history of the Spanish Conquest of Central Mexico. Quoting extensively from recently published works, and with numerous digressions about how chimpanzees behave in much the same way as did both Spaniards and Aztecs, the author retells the familiar story of a small company of Europeans from 1519-1521 that managed to gain control of the Aztec tributary empire. He gives full credit to the Tlaxcalans and other Indian allies and to the ravages of Old World diseases for their contribution to the conquest. Two preliminary chapters are devoted to cultural background in Spain and Central Mexico before 1519.

Next, Alves discusses the conquest from an ethological viewpoint, showing how the coalition between Hernán Cortés and the Aztecs' enemies had its roots in primate behavior. In several chapters on diet, clothing, and shelter, Alves makes good use of well-known ethnohistorical sources, notably the *Codex Mendoza*, the Sahagún corpus, and the *Relaciones Geográficas* of 1579-1585. A section on the post-conquest administration of justice owes much to the recent study of Woodrow Borah, with details added from the *audiencia* records conserved in the Archivo General de la Nación in Mexico City. There is a useful summary, mostly from published sources, of the symbiosis of European and Amerindian medical practices and of the benevolent side of both cultures in caring for the sick and destitute in hospital-almshouses. The role of woman as an agent in miscegenation, a healing force to counterbalance male aggression, and a stabilizing influence "in the midst of male hierarchical breakdown" (p. 213) is explored, with an illuminating aside on how the human kiss had its origin in primate mouth-to-mouth feeding.

While this book offers much food for thought, assembles a wealth of already published but fascinating data, and presents a novel approach to history, there is little original research here, and what there is cannot be trusted. The only colonial manuscript that Alves studies at some length, referring to the lands of a Nahua community (*altépetl*), was examined by this reviewer and was partially published in 1977. In his discussion of this manuscript, Alves confuses *tierras comunales* with *ejidos* (quite different in the sixteenth century). He also overlooks the fact that the original suit concerned a boundary dispute with neighboring communities rather than a supposed complaint against certain Spaniards whose livestock, he says, were "causing incredible damage" to Indian crops (p. 178). Further, Alves has been ill-served by his editors. The system of citation, with notes at the end of each chapter and no alphabetical bibliography, is difficult to use, and there are too many typographical and grammatical errors.

What, in sum, do we learn from this book? Sometimes ignorance is bliss. Do we really want to know the correlation between a Spanish *vara de justicia* and a chimpanzee's erect penis (p. 30)? This reviewer finds it dispiriting to be told that, after several million years of separation from the same ancestor, we still behave so much like chimpanzees. But then, if we are to believe Richard Dawkins, every living species on our planet (and far more that are now extinct) have one common ancestor. Perhaps there is still hope for *Homo sapiens*, but it is not to be found here.

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