

Reclaiming 'Colombian' identity: the toppling of Popayán's Belalcázar monument



By toppling the statue of conquistador Sebastián de Belalcázar, indigenous protesters were reclaiming a Colombian identity from which they have consistently been excluded, writes [Charlotte Eaton](#) (LSE International History).

The groundswell of support for the Black Lives Matter movement following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 led to statues of various slaveholders and beneficiaries of colonisation being torn down across the Western world. Yet, similar events in the regions most directly affected by imperialism and slavery, such as Latin America and Africa, have either not occurred or not received the same level of coverage as their Euro-American counterparts.



Media coverage of the toppling of statues linked to slavery and colonisation has tended to focus on Europe and the US, as in the case of Edward Colston in Bristol (BBC News)

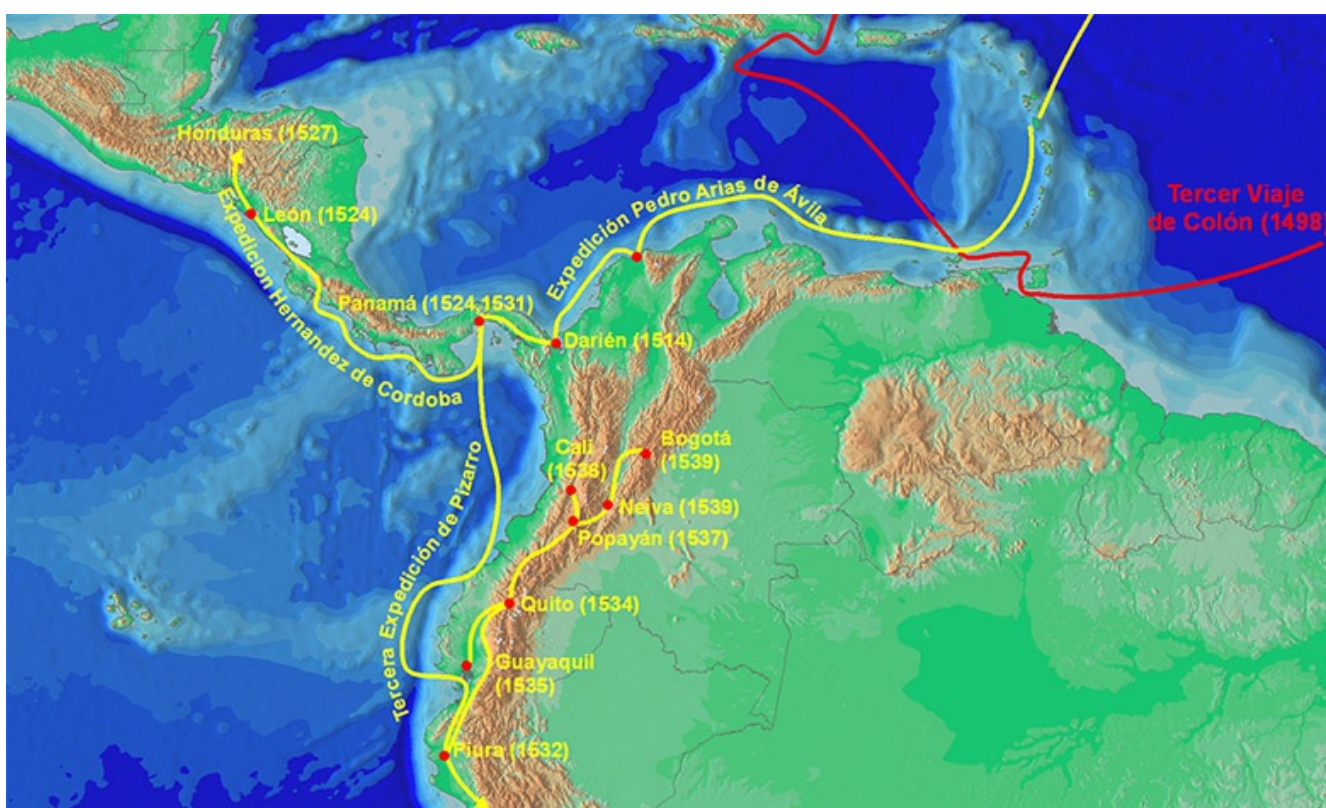
That is, until 17 September, when indigenous protesters in Cauca, Colombia (the country's most indigenous region) [pulled down](#) a statue of Spanish coloniser and slaveholder Sebastián de Belalcázar, which had been located on the Morro de Tulcán, site of an indigenous pyramid. This represents a watershed moment in the history of a nation that did not recognise indigenous populations' and other minority groups' equal rights to participate into society until 1991.

However, the links between the statue and the colonial legacy in Colombia run much deeper than who the monument commemorates, and they tell a much bigger story. By tracing the history of how the sculpture came to be, we can see how its toppling represents a reclaiming of Colombian history and heritage in more ways than one.

The beginnings of the Belalcázar statue

Juan Sebastián de Belalcázar was a Spanish conquistador who “founded” the now-Colombian cities of Cali, Pasto, and Popayán in the south of the country. He had actually initially travelled to Central America in the early 1500s, but by 1534 he had set off on his own mission to “conquer” Quito in Ecuador before heading north to Cali in 1536 and Pasto and Popayán the following year. In 1540, King Carlos I of Spain appointed him governor of Popayán.

Significantly, Belalcázar was a controversial figure even by colonial standards. During the Quito expedition, the conqueror arrived at a village called Quinche to find that all the men were away fighting with the national army. He therefore [ordered](#) that all the women and children be slaughtered as a lesson for those who returned home, an act that was [later described](#) as “cruelty unworthy of a Castilian” by Antonio Herrera y Tordesillas, Chief Chronicler of the Americas.



Belalcázar travelled around the Caribbean, Central America, and the Andean region before being named governor of Popayán in 1540 ([C. Arango](#), public domain)

In the spring and summer of 1936, the Governor of the Colombian Department of Cauca requested the authority to commission a bronze statue of Belalcázar mounted on horseback for the city of Popayán. Their chosen artist was the Spanish sculptor Victorio Macho, who they had previously contracted to create a slightly less grand statue of the same Spanish conquistador for the city of Cali. The Colombian government acceded to this request and the contract was signed on 25 June.

The minimum specifications for the statue were 5.4 metres tall, 2.5 metres long and 1 metre wide, and its original cost was set at 65,000 pesetas (approximately USD\$8,500). However, the Spanish Civil War that broke out less than a month later caused disruption to the construction and delivery of the statue, which meant its installation was delayed considerably.

Colombian monuments and Spanish sculptors

Considering this, it is strange that the Cauca Governor and the Colombian government were so keen to have a Spanish artist create the statue. Of course, they weren't to know that Spain was about to become embroiled in a civil war. But even at the time of the contract's signing, the Colombian Minister in Madrid was expressing concerns over why his country wasn't commissioning Colombian artists to design and build such sculptures. "It would", he asserted, "be a magnificent stimulus for national art", and it clearly would have avoided the logistical nightmares noted above. Yet, despite all the issues with the Belalcázar monument, in May 1937 the Colombian government decided to appoint Macho again, this time as the official sculptor for a monument to the Liberal military hero General Rafael Uribe Uribe.

These negotiations clearly throw up questions about Colombia's complex colonial legacy. Firstly, the fact that the Liberal and relatively nationalist government of Alfonso López Pumarejo (1934-1938) approved a monument to a Spanish conquistador indicates that exaltation of the country's colonial heritage was not the sole domain of the Conservatives, as is often suggested. Secondly, it is one thing to commission a Spanish artist to create a statue of a Spanish conqueror, but it is another matter entirely when the same Spanish artist is hired to design a monument to a *Colombian* hero. As the Colombian Minister in Madrid said at the time:

How nice it would be if within the new Republic the bronze statues that commemorate our men were designed by compatriots who can love and appreciate them.

The decision to choose a Spanish artist, however, was reflective of a broader tendency of the contemporary government to bring over Europeans to assist in cultural programmes. The so-called Liberal Republic – established in 1930 – placed huge emphasis on reinvigorating Colombian culture and education. Unfortunately, this was envisioned as "uplifting" the country's current offering by imbuing it with European trends, ideas, and indeed people, as in the case of Victorio Macho. This, again, suggests that by the late 1930s Colombia still hadn't quite cast off its colonial legacy.



People began to take different perspectives on the Belalcázar statue in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests of mid-2020 (Fotos593/Shutterstock.com)

Invisibilised indigeneity and Colombian identity

As the Colombian Minister's comments make clear, not everyone was a proponent of this approach. Yet, interestingly, amongst the concerns voiced over using Spanish artists to create Colombian monuments, there was no reference to the fact that the Belalcázar statue was to be erected on an indigenous site. Indeed, this point is completely absent from all the diplomatic correspondence over the matter despite the obvious issues associated with using an indigenous site to commemorate a Spanish colonialist with a history of brutality towards indigenous populations.

Though individuals may have bemoaned the fact that the chosen artist was not Colombian, their idea of "Colombian" evidently did not stretch to include the indigenous population whose history, traditions, and culture were being so grossly perverted. This is hardly surprising given that the darker side of the "cultural uplifting" policy was the whitewashing of the country's indigenous and Afro-Colombian traditions. Whilst the government espoused rhetoric of democracy, popular participation, and a greater sense of Colombian national identity, the reality is that the society it envisioned continued to be hierarchical and exclusive.

Unfortunately, this restrictive form of democracy continued until 1991, when the constitution was rewritten to include recognition and protection of Colombia's ethnic and cultural diversity. Thus, the actions of the indigenous protesters who topped Belalcázar take on even greater significance.

Firstly, and most notably, they have reclaimed a site that was theirs and avenged the insult of having a colonial figure commemorated there. However, this is a statue of a Spanish conquistador from the 1500s, a period when what is now known as Colombia was altered dramatically, and it was created by a Spanish artist in the 1930s, when attempts to create a "Colombian" national culture relied heavily on European influences. As such, by toppling the statue the protesters have also fulfilled the wishes of the Colombian Minister in Madrid that wanted the site to be "Colombian", albeit not in the way that he imagined.

Being "Colombian" involves acknowledgement of this problematic colonial legacy, and it involves aspects of other external influences following independence. But, most importantly, it involves recognising the many groups, sectors, and individuals who for so long have been ignored in elite visions of Colombian identity. These Colombians have played a very active role in contesting and mediating the aforementioned influences in order to contribute towards the construction of a society from which they have often been officially excluded. The toppling of the statue of Belalcázar in Popayán is just one more example of their frequently undervalued contribution.

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