

# Royalist Decorations in the Spanish American Wars of Independence

Cacique Núñez of Mamatoco and the Royal American Order of Isabel la Católica

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## Condecorações monarquistas nas guerras de independência da América Espanhola

O cacique Núñez de Mamatoco e a Real Ordem Americana de Isabel a Católica

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**ABSTRACT** This article uses the multiple royal distinctions received by the cacique of the small Indian pueblo of Mamatoco to explore the meanings and functions of decorations both from the perspective of the Crown's officials and the recipients. It explains the strategic use of decorations in time of war, the new enlightened character of honorific distinctions in the Napoleonic era, and why historians should be careful in viewing them as evidence of popular royalism.

**KEYWORDS** popular royalism, honorific distinctions, symbolic warfare

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**RESUMO** Este artigo usa as diversas distinções monarquistas recebidas pelo cacique do pequeno povoado indígena de Mamatoco para explorar os significados e as funções das condecorações tanto da perspectiva dos funcionários da Coroa quanto daqueles que as recebiam. O texto explica o uso estratégico das condecorações em tempos de guerra, o novo caráter iluminista das distinções honoríficas na era napoleônica, e por que os historiadores devem ser cuidadosos em considerá-las como uma evidência do monarquismo popular.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE** monarquismo popular, distinções honoríficas, guerra simbólica

On 25 July 1815, the day of Santiago — the patron saint of Spain — a highly symbolic ceremony took place on the beachfront of the small city of Santa Marta in the Viceroyalty of New Granada. General Pablo Morillo himself directed the ceremony. He was commander of the expeditionary army of 10,000 soldiers sent from Spain by the recently returned king, Fernando VII, to restore monarchical rule in Venezuela and New Granada. That day on the Caribbean shoreline, in front of his soldiers, Pablo Morillo decorated Antonio Núñez, the cacique of the small Indian town of Mamatoco, with a red ribbon and a diploma. This was undoubtedly meant to be a highly visible, impressive public display of the king's benevolence and generosity towards his loyal subjects. Morillo could not conduct the ceremony in its entire splendor, however. The gold medals engraved with the king's bust had been lost with the warship *San Pedro de Alcántara*. Still, the diploma, the ribbon, and the promise of a gold medal conferred upon Núñez in front of 10,000 Spanish soldiers, must have been a deliberately impressive sight. Moreover, the following year, the king declared that the cacique's services merited more elevated distinctions for the part that he played in the reconquest of the city of Santa Marta. Núñez was eventually awarded the rank and salary of army captain, and the cross of the American Order of Isabel

la Católica.<sup>1</sup> While the awarding of medals to subjects who had distinguished themselves in battle was quite common, decorating caciques of small Indian pueblos with membership into orders such as Isabel la Católica was certainly not. In fact, well into the 1820s, Antonio Núñez was the only Indian among the hundreds rewarded with a cross in the socially exclusive order.

Wartime decorations such as the ones conferred on Núñez are interesting for at least three reasons that will be explored in this article. They were an integral part of military strategy at the time, on both republican and royalist sides, frequently overlooked by later historians who have not appreciated the symbolic meaning and value of such visible distinctions in the societies where rank, honor and status were essential (Ihl, 2006; 2007; Artola Renedo, 2016; Borges da Silva, 2014). Second, during the Napoleonic period, new orders of distinctions were formed and old ones modified, spurred in part by Enlightenment debates on merit versus birthright, rational systems of rewards and punishments, and effective ways of bolstering patriotic virtue. The Royal American Order of Isabel la Católica is of particular interest in this regard, for it combined modern concepts of individual virtue with older notions of rank and distinctions. Third, little is known about how ordinary men and women perceived these decorations.

The case of Antonio Núñez, cacique of the small Indian town of Mamatoco just outside Santa Marta, serves as a microhistorical prism both to understand the dilemmas and disagreements among the royalists at the highest levels on how to motivate royalists and foment their patriotism, and to enquire into the motivations of the cacique and his followers in their relations with royalist officials. The article thus explores the possible meanings of Antonio Núñez's decoration. One question concerns the cacique's actions after 1813 and the motives behind

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1 Pablo Morillo to Secretario de Estado y Despacho Universal de Indias, Jul. 27, 1815; and "Expediente sobre haver condecorado el Capitan General Don Pablo Morillo con una medalla de distincion al Cacique de Indios Don Antonio Núñez", Archivo General de Indias (hereafter AGI), Santa Fe 1201.

them. This touches upon both alliances and antagonistic relationships between Núñez and other significant actors in the conflict during the first phase of the Spanish American wars of independence. Another issue concerns the decoration itself. Why did royalists confer medals and honorific distinctions upon Indians such as Antonio Núñez? What was the rationale behind them? And to what extent can the awards be understood as evidence for popular royalism in Spanish America?

### THE CACIQUE'S ACTIONS

The events of 1813 that were the basis for Antonio Núñez's decoration two years later are well known. Pierre Labatut, a French veteran of the Peninsular War and one of the Europeans who had accompanied Francisco Miranda to Venezuela, took Santa Marta on 1 January 1813 without resistance as commander of one of the divisions of the newly formed Liberation Army from the neighboring province of Cartagena (Labatut, 1996). Anticipating Labatut's incursion, most Spanish inhabitants fled with their families and slaves to Cuba or Portobelo. Local elite families stayed, and there are indications that at least some of them had secretly conspired against the Spanish royalists and that they even may have invited the insurgent army from Cartagena. However, Labatut's rule was anything but popular and, in the course of just two months, he had alienated most of the remaining population. At six o'clock in the morning on 5 March 1813, around 200 Indians, led by Núñez, retook the city of Santa Marta. The date marked an important turning point in the wars of independence in this part of Spanish America. From March 1813 to November 1820, Santa Marta was a principal royalist stronghold. From Santa Marta, expeditions to subdue insurgent provinces were launched, until Cartagena and Santa Fe de Bogotá were again in royalist hands.

Historians and other commentators writing about the events from a republican perspective have tended to view Antonio Núñez and the Indians from the towns surrounding Santa Marta as prime examples of naïve and primitive royalists who did not comprehend the abstract notions of liberty and national sovereignty for which the heroes of independence

fought. When the independence war is presented as a grand ideological conflict pitting the old, colonial, monarchical order against the new democratic and liberal republic, the Indians of Mamatoco, Bonda, Ciénaga, Taganga, and Gaira are reduced to backward-looking traditionalists. When we take a closer look, however, the conflict becomes less clear-cut (Sourdis, 1994; Restrepo Tirado, 1976; Saether, 2005b; Viloría De La Hoz, 2015).<sup>2</sup>

Núñez was by no means a prolific writer. Few direct sources have been found that may give us hints about his perspective on the unfolding political and military crisis. The best source at our disposal is a copy of a letter that he dictated just a few hours after Labatut's expulsion. It was written to the governor of the neighboring province of Riohacha, which was still controlled by forces loyal to the Spanish authorities:

Long Live Fernando VII. At six o'clock this morning we have attacked the French Pedro Labatut with all the fury of an aggravated Pueblo, united those of this Pueblo with those of Bonda and Santa Marta, and now at nine o'clock the combat has concluded nearly without casualties. Now I think I will proceed to the city, where a proclamation in support of Fernando VII has been made. Yesterday the Frenchman attacked this Pueblo, ... some people died and the entire carriage with munitions fell into our hands. You should immediately decide whether you will help us with ships, troops and other support in order to sustain us, and inform the governor of this city so that he may get on his way. The Frenchman has taken with him Colonel Munive on his flight. When the city is organized and the *cabildo* is set, they will inform you in more detail.<sup>3</sup>

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2 RESTREPO, José Manuel. *Historia de la revolución de la república de Colombia en la América Meridional*. Besanzon: J. Jacquin, 1858.

3 Cacique of Mamatoco to Governor of Riohacha, Mar. 5, 1813 (copy), in "Relación de las Obras que por si ha practicado el M.N. Y L. Pueblo de la Ciudad del Rio Hacha en defenza de los derechos de su soberano el Sr Dn Fernando 7o y de la Patria, para que el M. Y. Alluntamiento asi lo sertifique para usar de el ante quien corresponda," AGI, Santa Fe 746, fols. 91-92. The letter reads as follows in the original Spanish: "Viva Fernando Septimo.= A las seis de la mañana de este dia, hemos acometido al Frances Pedro Labatut con todo el furor de un Pueblo

Several aspects of this letter merit further comment. First, the cacique envisioned his actions in a conflict that concerned, if not royalism per se, then at least the rights of King Fernando VII and the monarchical order. Not only did he start the letter with a salute to the king, but in the short note he specifically mentions the proclamation in favor of the king which was made in Santa Marta once Labatut was evicted. The letter thus seems to lend support to the idea that the cacique of Mamatoco indeed considered this incident to be part of a war for the king's cause.

Furthermore, the word "pueblo" is repeated three times in the short letter, thus emphasizing the popular nature of the cacique's action. But as Francois Xavier Guerra, among others have noted, the term "pueblo" in Spanish may have at least three different meanings, and in this letter, too, the term may be understood in different ways (Guerra, 1993). On the most concrete level, the term refers to a territorial and physical location; "pueblo" as town or village. This is the most convincing understanding of the word as it appears in the phrase, "Yesterday the Frenchman charged against this *Pueblo*." The term may also refer to the inhabitants of the pueblos, as in the second instance in the letter: "those of this pueblo were united with those of Bonda and Santa Marta." But its first use has a more abstract meaning. "The fury of an aggravated pueblo" may be understood as a general reference to all the inhabitants of Bonda, Mamatoco, and Santa Marta, but it may also be read as a reference to the popular sectors in the city and surrounding towns. From the letter alone, it is impossible to ascertain whether the cacique had in mind an inclusive "pueblo" encompassing all inhabitants, or the socially

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agraviado, unido los de este Pueblo con los de Bonda y Santa Marta, y ahora que serán las nueve se ha concluido el combate, con casi ninguna desgracia. Ahora creo pasaré a la Ciudad donde se ha proclamado a Fernando Septimo. Ayer embistió a este Pueblo el Francés, y le quitamos un Biolento, murió alguna gente y todo el carruaje de pertrechos cayó en nuestras manos. Inmediatamente dispondrá VS. Auxiliarnos con Buques, Tropas y demás para sostenernos poniéndolo en noticia del Sor Gobernador de esta Ciudad para que se ponga en camino. El Francés se ha llevado en su profugacion al Coronel Munive. Luego que se organise la Ciudad, y el Cabildo se ponga, oficiarán a V.S., relacionándole mas por menor lo que ha pasado. Dios guarde a VS muchos años. Mamatoco 5 Marzo de 1813 = El Cacique de Mamatoco = Braulio Perea=José Maria de Robles= Agustín Perea= S<sup>or</sup> Gobernador de Rio Hacha'.

more restrictive “pueblo” understood as the plebeians. It is even possible that “pueblo” as used by the cacique referred to the tribute-paying Indians, in other words, those who lived in “pueblos de Indios”.

Clearly, Antonio Núñez was on the side of the king, but the letter only mentions one enemy: Labatut himself. There are no references to other enemies, either by name or more indirectly to groups or ideas. In referring to Labatut, the cacique calls him simply “the Frenchman,” and this convenient rhetorical device reflects the military context at the time. The king was still held captive in France, and both on the peninsula and in Spanish America, the royalists’ preferred narrative depicted them as defenders of the legitimate cause of the captive king; their opponents were *afrancesados* (Frenchified), possibly atheist, or at least anti-Catholic, intruders, opportunists, and rebels. In its insistence on labelling the enemy as “the Frenchman,” the letter mirrors the most convenient and simple narrative of the wars as seen from the royalist side.

Although the letter was welcome news for royal officials and royalists in neighboring provinces, the tone with which the cacique addressed the governor of Riohacha must have troubled him. Far from signaling submission to royal officials, the cacique approaches the governors with what seem more like direct orders and commands than polite requests. Instead of signaling subordination to royal officials, the cacique tells them what to do and makes promises on behalf of the city authorities. The news about the royalist takeover of Santa Marta was quickly disseminated. Copies of the letter from the cacique to the governor were forwarded to the viceroy and to royal officials across Spanish America and Spain. It was even published by the Mexican government’s *Gaceta* in August.<sup>4</sup>

As the cacique’s letter had suggested, the Indians’ military effectiveness put them in an influential position over the royal officials in Santa Marta. The following years, Cacique Núñez and the Indians of the small towns surrounding the city of Santa Marta achieved both symbolic and real benefits in exchange for their support of the king and the

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<sup>4</sup> *Gaceta del Gobierno de México*, Aug. 2, 1813, p.805.

*peninsulares*. First, the Indians held more than a hundred inhabitants imprisoned for suspicion of secretly supporting the Cartagena rebels. Moreover, when the new governor, Pedro Ruíz de Porras, arrived in Santa Marta a few weeks later, he was unable to convince the Indians to release them. The new captain-general of New Granada, Cuban-born Francisco Montalvo, arrived in Santa Marta in June 1813. He reported to Spain that the pueblo still refused to free the prisoners and accused governor Ruíz de Porras of arming the Indians and tolerating their confiscation of goods from the haciendas of wealthy creoles, whom the Indians called *jacobinos* (Saether, 2005a, p.205-206; 2005b, p.72; McFarlane, 2014, p.133-134; Earle, 2014, p.55-58). An even more astonishing example of popular interference in royal government occurred when the commoners of Santa Marta and the Indians of the surrounding towns refused to accept the newly-appointed governor of Santa Marta in 1814, and insisted that Ruiz de Porras continue in his position, which he in fact did until the final fall of royalist government in Santa Marta six years later. Neither Ruíz de Porras nor Montalvo were keen on this form of popular intervention, but they explained in several letters to the regency council in Spain that they did not see any alternative than to accede to the pueblo's request.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the cabildo of Santa Marta decreed in February 1814 that 5 March should henceforth be a day of festive celebration commemorating "the benefits which the Most Supreme Highness dispensed towards this pueblo with the expulsion of the troops of the illegal government of Cartagena". The bishop agreed that every 5 March a Te Deum would be sung accompanied by a solemn mass devoted to Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception. The decree explicitly stated that the cacique of Mamatoco should participate. Governor Ruíz de Porras would ensure the city's illumination during the festivities and organize

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5 "Pedro Ruiz de Porras solicita la estabilidad en el gobierno de Santa Marta". Archivo General de la Nación (hereafter AGN), Solicitudes 3, fols. 89-96.



an artillery salute. Captain-General Montalvo greeted this initiative wholeheartedly, and stated that he would gladly attend the ceremony.<sup>6</sup>

To call this an alliance between Indians and royalists is perhaps inaccurate. The Indians of Mamatoco and the other tributary towns around Santa Marta were on good terms with the Spanish-born governor, who in turn provided them considerable leeway and influence in the running of the city the next years. On the other hand, the captain-general, who was the governor's superior and at least nominally was both civil and military head of the entire captaincy-general of New Granada and Venezuela, did not dare to stay in the city of Santa Marta and took up residence in the El Morro fort on a tiny islet in Santa Marta bay.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, it was Montalvo himself who informed Morillo in July 1815 about cacique Núñez's actions (Earle, 2014, p.57). Núñez and his Indian followers certainly acted repeatedly in favor of the royalist cause. But far from displaying the kind of blind obedience that absolutist rhetoric called for, their support for monarchical rule implied more influence, greater autonomy and more privileges than they had enjoyed previously and certainly more than what they could hope for should the republicans be victorious (Echeverri, 2011).

## **THE HISPANIC TRADITION OF HONORIFIC ORDERS AND DISTINCTIONS**

What did the decoration itself mean to royal officials, military commanders, and the recipient himself? The distinction that Morillo initially meant to bestow upon the cacique was the gold medal with the bust of Fernando VII, with a ribbon and a diploma. By March 1815, when the Order of Isabel was created, Pablo Morillo's expedition was

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6 "Festividad del 5 de marzo en Santa Marta, como aniversario de la recuperación de esta plaza por las autoridades realistas", in: CORRALES, Manuel Ezequiel. *Documentos para la historia de Cartagena*. vol. 1. Bogotá: Rivas, 1883. p.624.

7 Governor of Santa Marta and Cabildo to Captain-General, Santa Marta, 3 Oct. 1813, AGN, Archivo Anexo I.17, Historia, Legajo 15, doc. 40, fols. 231-237.

already on its way across the Atlantic, having set sail from Cádiz the previous month with 65 ships and more than 10,000 soldiers. Morillo had received a set of quite precise and lengthy instructions from the minister of Indies, Mexican-born Miguel de Lardizábal, dated 28 November 1814. One of the paragraphs explicitly stated that the inhabitants of Coro and Santa Marta should be rewarded for their loyalty.<sup>8</sup> The expedition brought an unknown number of golden medals with the bust of recently returned king with which worthy individuals should be decorated. However, in one of the great tragedies of the expedition, a fire destroyed the main warship *San Pedro Alcántara* on 24 April 1815 off the coast of Venezuela, and all the medals were lost.

During the ceremony in front of Morillo's soldiers on the beachfront of Santa Marta, the cacique was thus decorated with only a ribbon and a diploma. The event was duly noted in the official diary of the Expeditionary Army and at more length in a letter from Morillo to the Council of Indies two days later. But Morillo himself was not very enthusiastic about decorations of this type. In his memoirs, there are no mentions of decorations, medals, and distinctions. In the letter, he apparently reproduces the words of Captain-General Montalvo, who was no fan of the cacique. Yet, the description of the cacique's deeds are laudatory. The medal was awarded on the basis of

the distinguished services and bravery of the Indian cacique of Mamatoco and surrounding towns, Don Antonio Núñez who worked so admirably for the reconquest of this city on 5 March 1813 with the expulsion of the wicked Pedro Labatut. He used all his extraordinary courage and the power that he wields over those of his class and the rest of these lands, who respect him and consider him great. These he

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8 "Instrucciones dadas al general Morillo para su expedición a Costafirme, por el ministro universal de Indias Lardizábal. Muy reservado". Madrid, Nov. 18, 1814. Real Academia de Historia (hereafter RAH), Colección Morillo, sig. 9/7651, b), fols. 39-46v.

employed to give impulse and energy to the action that resulted in the insurgents' defeat and shameful flight.<sup>9</sup>

Awarding medals, ribbons, and diplomas to loyal and useful subjects and soldiers was not new. In eighteenth-century Spanish America, many medals were awarded, and not only to individuals who belonged to the highest strata of civil, military, or ecclesiastic hierarchies. They were especially frequent during times of violent conflicts, for instance during the large Andean rebellions in the 1780s. Nevertheless, the crown was careful to ensure that the awards conformed to the ideals of social stratification. In the documents concerning the medal and ribbon conferred to the cacique, Marcos Cevallos y Condorpusa, in the aftermath of the Tupac Amaru rebellion, Spanish authorities were very clear on the principle that he should receive not only the medal but also the ribbon, because "otherwise the award would be just the same as the one given to *morenos* and *pardos*".<sup>10</sup> Therefore, although decorations were to some extent awarded based on personal merit, clear limits were established to avoid upsetting social stratification and hierarchy. As we shall see, this was also a major point of discussion when the Order of Isabel was instituted and especially during its first years of existence.

One essential aspect of the decorations that is frequently overlooked is that one of their primary functions was to secure the recipient's *future* loyalty. They were not only symbolic recognitions of past heroic actions, but also meant to bind the recipient to the king in the future. Such was evidently the case when the governor of Santo Domingo, Joaquín García, argued in favor of decorating Toussaint Louverture with a gold medal. This occurred in January 1794, during the first phase of the Haitian insurrection when the black rebels still fought with the Spanish

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9 Pablo Morillo to Secretario de Estado y del Despacho Universal de Indias, Jul. 27, 1814, AGI, Santa Fe 1201.

10 "Concesión de la banda encarnada y medalla de Carlos III a Marcos Cevallos y Condorpusa, cacique de Arequipa", Archivo General de Simancas (hereafter AGS), SGU, leg. 7124,47, fols. 397-403.

against the French. The governor's argument testifies to the importance of the future function of the decorations: "Once the medals arrive, ... I will award one of them to this good *Negro*, in order to compel him even more into subordination and loyalty, and inspire in him the sentiments of love and blind obedience".<sup>11</sup> As theorized by anthropologist Marcel Mauss a hundred and thirty years later, a gift possesses an almost magical power that transcends the spiritual and the material by engaging the honor of both giver and receiver, creating a social bond between the two, and a debt that the receiver has to repay (Mauss, 1954).

From the king's point of view, it was especially important to attract the obligations of subjects such as Louverture, who enjoyed the respect and loyalty of many followers. In this way, one distinction offered by the Crown could "buy" the loyalty of hundreds. When Morillo informed the Council of the Indies about his decoration of Cacique Núñez, the phrase "he used ... the power that he wields over those of his class and the rest of these lands, who respect him and consider him great" carried a heavy political meaning. At stake was not only future loyalty of the cacique himself, but also more important, the support of the Indians and the popular classes in general for the royalist cause.

For the decorations to function in the way intended by the king's representatives, it was vital that the recipients esteemed them. There are many indications that decorations were coveted. In the Andes at the time of the wars of independence, where the awarding of gold medals to Indian soldiers who fought for the monarchy was so widespread that the term "*indio amedallado* [bemedalled Indian]" became a synonym for Indian royalist, anecdotes recorded by the soldier José Santos Vargas in his diary demonstrate the value attached to the decorations. He tells the story of one Indian who willingly accepted that his mother be executed for helping the republicans in exchange for him being awarded with a medal from the king (Santos Vargas; Mendoza L., 1982, p.180).

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11 Joaquín García, Governor of Santo Domingo, to Duque de Alcudia, Jan. 3, 1794, AGI, Estado 14, documento 89, fol. 2v.

Fernando VII himself and many of his highest-ranking ministers and generals were convinced that decorations were effective in fomenting popular support and loyalty. At the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, they introduced a series of new distinctions. One of them was the Royal American Order of Isabel la Católica. It represented a remarkable and uneasy mix of Hispanic tradition and enlightened innovation. In Medieval Iberian history, the religious, military and civil orders had been of singular importance. The Orders of San Juan, Calatrava, Santiago, Montesa, and Alcántara were crucial in both the Reconquista and the Crusades, processes that converted them into large landholding communities, and virtual military and religious companies, governed by a master and supported by a high council, with wide-ranging military, commercial, agricultural, and religious autonomy.

During the sixteenth century, however, the Spanish orders were substantially reformed. Cavalry lost relative importance to artillery and infantry. Kings — especially in Spain — acquired more power, while the nobility were subordinated to the Crown. The king of Spain gradually became the grand master of all the significant orders, which meant that the knights were now direct vassals of the monarch and had to swear loyalty to him. Simultaneously, the orders lost lands to the crown or the Church. In Spain, the medieval chivalric orders maintained their names, and no new dynastic orders were instituted until the late eighteenth century. The importance of purity of blood and noble lineage, as well as a life of service to the crown, preferably near the court, became more important than experience in war and conquest. Although their economic and military importance were reduced, and chivalric life was moralized into a set of norms that were acceptable to the Church, some historians have argued that the ideals of chivalry survived longer on the Iberian peninsula than elsewhere in Europe. At least, remnants of a noble ethos remained; it included courtesy (especially vis-à-vis ladies), equestrian and hunting skills, the proper handling of a sword, courage, generosity, the binding character of the oath, loyalty to the lord (which now meant loyalty to the king), and the insistence on the idea that this

chivalric honor was more valuable than life itself (Ceballos-Escalera y Gila; García-Mercadal y García-Loygorri, 2003, p.50-69; Keen, 1984, p.238-253; Rodríguez Velasco, 2010).

The royal orders instituted during the first years of Fernando VII's reign testify to the importance that he placed on them. He was not alone. Contemporary European and American rulers, both republican and royalist, established new orders and decorations to instill patriotism and obedience, and seem to have had little doubt about their effectiveness. The eighteenth-century renaissance of honorific orders was also spurred by the learned discussion among contemporary philosophers about systems of rewards and punishments. Enlightenment thinkers such as Giacinto Dragonetti and the Marquis of Beccara in Italy, Abbé Sieyès in France, and Jeremy Bentham in England all toyed with the idea of establishing systematic and rational codes of distinctions to reward extraordinary individual merit. New systems would replace the old dynastic orders, which were seen to uphold a system of hereditary privileges that promoted vanity and corruption rather than virtue and true patriotism (Bruni, 2013; Dijn, 2008; Borges da Silva, 2014; Ihl, 2006). Ideas such as these were also put forward in Spain, for instance by Manuel de Godoy, Ramón de Dou de Bassols and José Cangas Argüelles (Ceballos-Escalera y Gila; García-Mercadal y García-Loygorri, 2003, p.42-43; Artola Renedo, 2016). The new orders would be socially inclusive, not limited to certain corporate groups. Hereditary claims would not be considered and recipients would not be permitted to simply buy a distinction without proving individual merit and patriotic virtue.

When First Consul Napoleon Bonaparte founded the famous Legion of Honor in France, it was first met with skepticism, especially by the more radical elements of the State Council who argued that it was too similar to old-regime decorations that only fomented the quest for superficial vanity. The Legion was approved, however, in 1802 by a vote of 14 to 10, after Napoleon himself had argued strongly in favor of distinctions. When the minister of war, Louis-Alexandre Bethier, claimed that they violated the principle of equality and that they resembled the rattles or baubles (*hochets*) of the old monarchy, Napoleon famously

responded: “Show me a republic, ancient or modern, that has worked without distinctions. You call them baubles, well ... with baubles men are led”. Then Napoleon went on to say something that is seldom quoted:

I would not say this in public, but in an assembly of wise statesmen it should be said. I don't think the French love liberty and equality: the French are not changed by ten years of revolution: they are what the Gauls were, fierce and fickle. They have one feeling: honor. We must nourish that feeling. The people clamor for distinction. See how the crowd is awed by the medals and orders worn by the foreign diplomats. We must recreate these distinctions. There has been too much tearing down; we must rebuild. A government exists, yes and power, but the nation itself — what is it? Scattered grains of sand (Roberts, 2014, p.350).

Nevertheless, there were fundamental differences between the French monarchical orders and Napoleon's new order. The Legion of Honor was meant to be a visible demonstration of patriotic and republican virtue based on individual merit alone, open to any citizen regardless of birth and rank, while most of the old orders had been reserved for the nobility and military officers. According to Michael J. Hughes, the Legion represented the triumph of a new patriotic honor based on merit and loyalty to the emperor over the old quest for noble status, privilege, and glory (Hughes, 2012, p.61-69).

## **THE NEW ROYAL AMERICAN ORDER OF ISABEL LA CATÓLICA**

In Spain and Spanish America, republicans and royalists alike followed suit. Simón Bolívar copied Napoleon in October 1813, when he instituted the Order of the Liberator.<sup>12</sup> Just a few months later, when

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12 “Decreto de institución de la Orden de los Libertadores de Venezuela, dictado por Bolívar en Caracas, el 22 de octubre de 1813”, <http://www.archivodellibertador.gob.ve/escritos/buscador/spip.php?article10408> (Accessed Oct. 19, 2016).

Fernando VII returned from his captivity in France, one of his first actions was to institute the Royal American Order of Isabel la Católica in order to reward “the most purified and refined loyalty and merits in the defense and conservation of those vast (American) domains” (Ceballos-Escalera y Gila; García-Mercadal y García-Loygorri, 2003, p.338-339).<sup>13</sup>

Although the king personally took a keen interest in decorations of this kind, the initial idea for a new American order came from below. It was the young, liberal-minded official, Pedro Francisco Goossens y Ponce de León, who during the latter half of 1814 suggested the creation of an order exclusively based on individual merit to his superior, minister of the Council of Indies, Miguel de Lardizabal (Ceballos-Escalera y Gila, 2015, p.51-53).<sup>14</sup> We do not know what inspired Goossens to make the suggestion in the first place. He may have been inspired by the French example, as he had strong connections with France and the *afrancesados* in Spain both personally, and through his family, which owned an important merchant house based in Bilbao (Rodríguez de Maribona y Dávila; Floresta, 2007-2008). Events overseas evidently played a part. Winning the loyalty of the population was obviously an important aim in a time of war, and it may not be coincidence that the Order of Isabel was established right after the Order of the Libertador. But the royalist sources consulted for this article paid scant attention to Bolivar’s order.

Neither the king nor the notables who were appointed to serve in the first Supreme Assembly of the Order were prepared to make the order

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13 This was by no means the only new order and honorific distinction that Fernando VII created immediately upon his return from France. The anonymous author of *Noticia de las ordenes de caballería de España, cruces y medallas de distinción* published in 1815 just one year after Fernando VII’s return, attempted to list all the orders, crosses, and medals that then existed in Spain. He listed eleven orders, of which six were medieval ones, two dated from the late eighteenth century, and three new ones were instituted in the short reign of Fernando VII. In addition, Fernando VII created at least fifteen medals and crosses outside the orders to be awarded primarily to the heroes of the Peninsular War ( *Noticia de las órdenes de caballería de España, cruces y medallas de distinción, con estampas*. Madrid: Imprenta de Collado, 1815.).

14 See also “Libro primero de Asambleas de la Real Orden Americana de Isabel la Católica que dió por principio en 29 de Mayo de 1815, y concluyó en 25 de Noviembre de 1846” (hereafter Libro primero), AHN, Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores (hereafter MAE), C. – Libro 226, fols. 43v-45v.



quite as socially inclusive and meritocratic as Goossens had envisioned. The Enlightenment principle of individual merit would from the outset come into conflict with traditional views on social rank. From March 1814 until the second publication of the order's constitution in October 1816, there were several discussions between the king, his ministers and the members of the Supreme Assembly about whether Indians or *castas* were eligible for the new order's higher classes. That they could receive medals was beyond dispute. In an early manuscript version of its constitution, the order would include three classes: Grand Cross, Cross of the First Order, and Cross of the Second Order. The latter two could be awarded in gold or in silver. Article 6 of the manuscript version stated that only whites and Indians could be awarded the crosses in gold, while *castas* could only receive the silver crosses and never the Grand Cross.<sup>15</sup> The reasoning clearly followed a long-standing colonial tradition in Spanish America of recognizing — at least sometimes — indigenous aristocrats as nobles while considering African heritage an insuperable obstacle to nobility (Earle, 2016; Quintero Montiel, 2010; Helg, 2004, p.91-97; Lasso, 2007, p.19-43). In one of the Supreme Assembly's first meetings, on 8 June 1815, each of the articles of the constitution was discussed at length, and the council members agreed to suggest some modifications to these articles' wording.<sup>16</sup> The overall aim, it seems, was to ensure the Order's prestige and simultaneously to simplify it by reducing the number of ranks. The assembly proposed that the Order should include Grand Cross, Comendador (instead of Cross of the First Order), and Caballero (instead of Cross of the Second Order), and that the insignia of all three should be of gold. This, the assembly argued, "together with the exclusion of the *castas*, would make the order shine brighter".<sup>17</sup> There still existed, in other words, a concern that, if *castas*

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15 Miguel de Lardizabal to Francisco Tadeo Colomarde, AHN, MAE, legajo 13.

16 Libro primero, fol. 4r-5v, AHN, MAE.

17 Libro primero, fol. 4v, AHN, MAE. The description of the gold medals that the assembly proposed in June 1815 seem to match the descriptions of the medals that Morillo had brought with him months earlier and which had been lost with the *San Pedro de Alcántara* on 24

were awarded the higher ranks of the order, its prestige would be undermined. Instead, the assembly argued, blacks and mestizos who deserved an honorific distinction should receive a gold medal ingrained with the bust of Fernando VII. The same medal could also be given to soldiers of lower rank (corporals, sergeants, drummers, and trumpeters), and if they were not castas, they would receive medals with a laurel wreath. This racialized system of ranks prevailed, and was included in the first published versions of the constitution of the Order.<sup>18</sup>

The Royal American Order of Isabel la Católica thus came to represent an odd mix of enlightened meritocracy and conservative social values. Although the constitution explicitly stated that the order would be open to any subject and that the beneficiaries did not need to prove nobility, it nevertheless maintained a system of rank to ensure that individual distinctions awarded to blacks, mestizos, and castas in general did not upset the social hierarchy of the Spanish domains. The new Order of Isabel la Católica thus — somewhat paradoxically — simultaneously incorporated the new ideal of individual merit *and* reinforced the social and racial hierarchies of the Spanish colonial system in the Americas.

After having gained the king's support for the order's constitution, the General Assembly paid little attention to the medals, which were awarded locally and in some instances quite liberally. Instead, the members met regularly (often several times per month) to discuss applications for Grand Cross, Comendador, and Caballero. Several hundred of these distinctions were awarded during the first years. In practice, the dilemmas of race and social rank did not much bother the assembly. Most crosses were in any case awarded to viceroys, admirals, generals,

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April 1815. Even though it is not mentioned explicitly in the sources, it is possible that the assembly's restructuring of the distinctions was motivated by the need to cut costs. No medals or crosses would have to be issued in silver, and medals used for castas and soldiers of a type would be that same that had already been made and shipped to the Americas.

18 *Institución de la Real Orden Americana de Isabel la Católica, 1815; Constituciones de la Real Orden Americana de Isabel la Católica, instituida por el Rey nuestro Señor en 24 de marzo de 1815, 1816.*

archbishops, and ministers, in other words more or less loyal members of the highest echelons of the military, civil, and ecclesiastical hierarchies in Spain and Spanish America. The issue of race did not enter into the discussion in these cases (Ceballos-Escalera y Gila, 2015).

However, at least two other Indians in addition to the cacique of Mamatoco were considered in those years, the Count of Moctezuma and the Marquis of Oropesa. Respectively descendants of the last Aztec ruler and the Inca dynasty, both had established themselves in Spain and been educated at prestigious schools there. They were unquestionably considered nobility and, in both instances the Supreme Assembly thought they were worthy of the Grand Cross. However, the king himself denied their requests, possibly fearing that they were potential pretenders to the thrones of independent American kingdoms; anything that might bolster their social and political standing was too risky.<sup>19</sup> In the case of the only Afro-descendant applicant from those years that we have encountered, the opinions were reversed. The Supreme Assembly argued that José Nicasio Gallego, commander of a squadron of the Royal Militia for Coloreds in Caracas, could not become a caballero due his “*calidad* [quality]”. However, the king thought otherwise, granted a dispensation, and ordered that he should receive the award.<sup>20</sup> Along with Antonio Núñez, the pardo militia captain was the outstanding exception among all the *agraciados*, and they both owed their distinctions to what seems to have been personal intervention by the king himself and not to the aristocratic Supreme Assembly.

Decorations in the new American Order of Isabel la Católica were highly coveted, as can be ascertained by the recipients’ willingness to pay for the insignia. Only in exceptional circumstances were the *agraciados* exempted from paying the fee. They were not allowed to wear the insignia nor use the titles associated with the Order, until the fee was paid. The cost was considerable. A Grand Cruz typically cost 11000 reales de vellón (4400 reales de plata/550 pesos), a Comendador’s cross

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19 Libro primero, fol. 108r, AHN, MAE. See also: CEBALLOS-ESCALERA Y GILA, 2015, p.82.

20 Libro primero, fols 176r and 179v, AHN, MAE.

was 4400 reales de vellón (1760 reales de plata/220 pesos) and the cross of a Caballero, 3600 reales de vellón (1440 reales de plata/180 pesos).<sup>21</sup> Considering that the governor's annual salary in Santa Marta was 2000 pesos, that of the treasurer was 750 pesos and an adult slave normally cost around 250 pesos, the sums demanded for the insignia were exorbitant.<sup>22</sup> Yet, most of the recipients willingly paid, although some — at least initially — applied for exemptions. The fees collected seems to have generated a small surplus for the Crown, although this was never the main the motive for instituting the order. The Supreme Assembly understood that they could not count on funding from other sources for the administration of the order, so the number of crosses offered to subjects who were unable to pay the fees had to be kept to a minimum. Each exemption could set a dangerous precedent.<sup>23</sup>

The general tendency of decorating the highest officers and officials was also seen locally in Santa Marta. Governor Ruíz de Porras was awarded the Cross of Comendador by the Supreme Assembly on 29 August 1815, while Pablo Morillo, his second- in-command Field Marshal Pascual Enrile, and Captain-General Francisco Montalvo were all distinguished with the Grand Cross on 6 May 1816.<sup>24</sup> Distinctions in the new Royal American Order of Isabel la Católica were highly coveted, and not all requests were granted even when the social condition and racial quality of the applicants were unquestionable. The Supreme Assembly advised rather coolly in 1817 that local notables like Esteban Díaz Granados (oidor honorario de Santa Fe) and Silvestre Díaz Granados (militia captain in Santa Marta) direct their petitions to a provincial assembly of the order (which in fact never seems to have been established). This may have been because members of the extensive and influential Díaz Granados family in Santa Marta were suspected of

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21 AHN, MAE\_C, L. 328 is the first account book of the order with registrations of the fees paid by the agraciados.

22 Tanteos y cortes de la Real Hacienda de Santa Marta. AGI, Santa Fe 1207.

23 Libro primero, fols. 11v-13v, AHN, MAE.

24 Libro primero, fols. 15r-18r, AHN, MAE.

secretly supporting the insurgents.<sup>25</sup> Soon after, the cathedral chapter of the bishopric of Santa Marta collectively petitioned the Council of Indies to be conferred the Cross of Comendador of the Order. This application was met with outright mockery by the *fiscal*, who claimed that their services during the war were “obvious, trivial, and common”, in other words, completely without merit.<sup>26</sup> In other words, neither social standing nor willingness to pay were enough to obtain distinctions in the new order; at least some degree of loyalty and exceptional service were required.

### **HOW THE CROSS OF ISABEL LA CATÓLICA WAS CONFERRED ON THE CACIQUE**

Given the socially exclusive nature of the order, how can we explain that Antonio Núñez, cacique of Mamatoco, was made a caballero? After all, unlike most recipients he had not applied for it. Neither Morillo, Montalvo, nor Ruiz de Porras suggested that he should receive anything more than the gold medal and the diploma. No other cases of Indian notables receiving the order in those years are known. The documents in the Archivo Historico Nacional in Madrid and in the Archivo General de Indias in Seville, unfortunately, only provide some hints for the surprising decision to decorate Núñez. We do know that the second chamber of the Council of Indies discussed Morillo’s decoration of Núñez on 3 and 21 February 1816. The *fiscal* who prepared the case proposed that the Council not only confirm the decoration made by Morillo, but also that the cacique’s son — Juan José — be awarded a similar medal in silver and the right to inherit his father’s *cacicazgo*. The ministers went even further. They argued that Núñez had not only secured the important city of Santa Marta for the royalist cause, but that this in turn had enabled Morillo’s subsequent siege of Cartagena and the reconquest of

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25 Libro primero, fol. 85r, AHN, MAE. For more on the Díaz Granados family, see: SAETHER, 2005a, p.54-60.

26 Santa Fe 549, AGI.

the entire viceroyalty. In their opinion, therefore, Antonio's son should receive the gold medal, while the cacique himself should be given the rank and salary of army captain *and* be awarded the cross of the recently established Order of Isabel la Católica. In this manner, the ministers of the Council of Indies recommended that the cacique be ennobled. The king then confirmed this recommendation.<sup>27</sup>

It is reasonable to suspect that one of the members of the Council of Indies pushed for the decoration of the cacique in 1816. Since the individual opinions of the ministers are not recorded, council documents do not indicate who advocated for the cacique. Of the six council members who were present at the meetings in February 1816 (Francisco Requena, Francisco Xavier de la Vega, Cayetano Urbina, Joaquin de Mosquera, Manuel Maria Junco, Mariano Gonzalez de Merchante), only two seem to have had special knowledge and interest in matters pertaining to New Granada; Francisco Requena and Joaquín Mosquera y Figueroa. Of these, Mosquera seems to have played a particularly interesting role. At the beginning of 1816, he was not only serving in Council of Indies, but he was simultaneously both secretary and *fiscal* of the Royal American Order of Isabel la Católica, and thus had in-depth knowledge of the order and how the processes of distinctions worked. Curiously, the Supreme Assembly of the Order never discussed the distinction awarded to the cacique. It was only on 13 October 1820 that the assembly was formally informed that the title of caballero had been awarded to Antonio (or Antonino) Núñez by the king in 1816 following the Council of Indies' recommendation. Therefore, according to the minutes, there was no need to inform the king. The assembly also agreed that the title should be issued without the customary fees and sent to Morillo so that he could present it to the cacique.<sup>28</sup>

There was nothing directly illegal in these proceedings. According to the order's constitution, the king had the right to confer crosses without consulting the Supreme Assembly, which he did on several occasions.

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27 Santa Fe 549 and Santa Fe 1201, AGI.

28 Libro primero, AHN, MAE, fol. 109r.

However, given the assembly's concerns regarding the order's prestige and its reluctance to exempt recipients from paying the expensive fees, it is possible that Mosquera was able to use his double influence first in the Council of Indies and later in the Supreme Assembly to grant an unusual favor to the cacique of Mamatoco. However, the documents do not reveal anything about what motivated Mosquera.

In the documents concerning the cacique's decoration, there are no actual letters from him or references to requests coming from him. Unlike most recipients, it seems that he never asked for the distinction in the first place, nor for an exemption from the fees, unless he maintained private correspondence with Mosquera. This means that we have limited evidence on the basis of which to consider whether he actually coveted the title. What we do have, however, is an 1818 letter penned by Santa Marta's protector of Indians on behalf of the cacique and cabildo of Mamatoco, sent via the governor of Santa Marta to the Council of Indies, in which they ask for a reduction of the annual tribute from four to two pesos per Indian male between the ages of 18 and 50. This request was immediately granted in light of the services offered in the past; the council explicitly intended that the Indians be "impressed with His Majesty's goodness and munificence".<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the cacique considered partial exemption from tribute a more useful award than a title and membership in the very exclusive order.

From 1813 to 1820, the Indian towns around Santa Marta represented by Antonio Núñez apparently nurtured a strategic alliance with peninsular royal officials. In exchange for the Indians' military and political support, the crown's representatives offered both symbolic and material rewards, among others the decoration and the conferring of noble status on the cacique. This, however, does not necessarily mean that either the cacique or the tribute-paying Indians in general were committed royalists.

Contemporary commentators seemed not to think so, at least. José Manuel Restrepo, minister of interior and foreign affairs in the 1820s

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<sup>29</sup> Consulta de sala segunda de 27 de junio de 1818, Santa Fe 1178, AGI.

and author of a seven-volume book on the history of the revolution in Colombia, wrote that the cacique's motive in March 1813 was merely to free a friend imprisoned by Labatut.<sup>30</sup> Luis Capella Toledo, a well-known author of *Leyendas históricas* (Historical Legends), several decades later wrote an article entitled "Bolívar and the last cacique" (Capella Toledo, 1885). Although the boundaries between fiction and reality are deliberately obscure in Capella's texts, and despite the rather fanciful ending of the story, the author may have captured, if not Antonio Núñez' true sentiments, then at least the common contemporary impression of them in Santa Marta.<sup>31</sup> Morillo's ceremony of decoration on the beaches of Santa Marta in 1815 was, according to Capella, just a spectacle to maintain popular enthusiasm, "because it is well known that the cacique of Mamatoco was no royalist". Capella explains that "Cacique Núñez found it just that the natives should intend to reconquer the lands stolen from them; but he sympathized neither with the King's cause nor with the Republic's, because both would disinherit them of their legitimate rights" (Capella Toledo, 1885, vol. 3, p.24). Capella's argument thus foreshadows subalternist views on the independence period, like the ones proposed by Eric Van Young and Peter Guardino for the case of Mexico during the same period (Van Young, 2001; Guardino, 2005; 1996). Indian engagement during the Latin American wars of independence cannot be understood simply as either royalist or republican. Royal decorations involving medals, diplomas and orders should be interpreted with care, and may not reflect the recipients' political sentiments or loyalties.

Nevertheless, decorations are still important and useful for historians, for they were part of a war of symbols that republicans and royalists alike considered a most useful and effective weapon in the conflict. Decorating

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30 RESTREPO, José Manuel. *Historia de la revolución de la república de Colombia en la América Meridional*. Besanzon: J. Jacquin, 1858. vol. 3. p.262.

31 This article, like most of the "legends" of Capella Toledo, was probably published in a periodical before it appeared in the 1885 edition of his *Leyendas históricas*. Many of the commentators at the time compared his work to that of Ricardo Palma in Peru. In the prologue to the third volume of *Leyendas*, Luis Capella Toledo wrote ambiguously about his relation to history (CAPELLA TOLEDO, 1885, p.vx-vxi).



soldiers and civilians with medals, diplomas, honorific titles, and membership in exclusive orders was not a new phenomenon in the wars of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. However, new enlightenment ideas about punishment and rewards were adopted in slightly different ways by both republican and royalist regimes. To modern eyes, it may be hard to appreciate the meaning and symbolic significance of decorations and the very public displays of which they were a part. In old regime societies, clothing and decorations were outward, direct, and physical manifestations of status and rank. As Restrepo remarked at the time: “Morillo, in order to impress the local population, organized various ostentatious inspection parades of his troops.... And in order to maintain popular enthusiasm, he awarded prizes to those royalists who had distinguished themselves the most, [among them] ... the cacique of Mamatoco”<sup>32</sup>

This strategic use of decorations with their public displays in elaborate ceremonies, military parades, ritual Te Deums, and civic festivities sought to co-opt influential local leaders for the royalist cause and to foster the future loyalty of their supporters. Although it is difficult to gauge the effectiveness of this symbolic warfare, it is at least clear that some high-ranking Spanish officials and most probably the king himself thought that decorations, distinctions, and honorific rewards were essential to maintain popular support for the monarchy. Most of the recipients eagerly paid very substantial fees for the right to wear the insignia and to use the titles. However, some recipients were not enthusiastic actors in this theater of distinction. In Capella’s story, the cacique walks to the city of Santa Marta and buys decent clothes to wear during the decoration ceremony. After the ceremony, he feels humiliated. Fearing the reactions of his people, he leaves both the new clothes and the decorations in the old customs house. The climactic turning point of the story occurs twenty-seven years later, when the defunct body of Simón Bolívar is draped in the same clothes bought and worn by the last cacique for his decoration by Bolívar’s archenemy, Pablo Morillo.

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32 RESTREPO, José Manuel. *Historia de la revolución de la república de Colombia en la América Meridional*. Besanzon: J. Jacquin, 1858. vol. 1. p.350.

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