

## CENTRAL AMERICA

## From Positivism to YouTube: Music and Nationalism

By Leonel Alvarado

**N**ations are made up of things we choose to remember and things we choose to forget. This idea still stands, even though the French philosopher Ernest Renan first expressed it in 1882. Choosing what to remember and what to forget about a nation's past is based on a selective perception of what that nation was in the past, what it is in the present, and what we want it to be in a future we are busy shaping. But who chooses? The choice always comes from above, from those with the power to imagine a future that will affect the lives of the majority.

My concern here is with the way in which nationhood is channeled through a discourse that is bound to be long-lived, despite being based on an anachronistic perception of what a nation should be. I am referring to national anthems, particularly to the national anthems of Central America. However, these observations also apply — with some distinctions — to most national anthems around the world.

National anthems are intriguing because they have an enormous impact on our idea of nationalism, even though they're anachronistic, full of clichés, and of little or no poetic merit. As in many other instances, such was the conclusion of the panel of judges tasked with selecting a new anthem for Ireland in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The award was 50 guineas (approximately \$4,000 today), but according to the Nobel prize-winning poet W.B. Yeats, not a single entry was deserving of such amount. And so, "The Soldier's Song" still stands as the Irish national anthem.

Many countries have attempted to replace or make changes to their national anthems, and some have succeeded. In June 2016, the Canadian parliament decided to make a significant change to "O, Canada." The line "True patriotic love in all thy sons command" was replaced by "True patriotic love in all of us command" to include people of all genders. This change was not merely cosmetic, but reflected a change in policy and, above all, a renewed social inclusiveness.

### Order and Progress

In Central America, which is my focus here, the road to selecting the current national anthems was tortuous.

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A military-style boys' band poses with their instruments, 1903.  
(Photo from Wikimedia Commons.)



Sheet music for the Guatemalan national anthem, 1937.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the anthems changed almost every time there was a new government, and these transformations spilled into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For instance, in 1934, under the dictatorship of Jorge Ubico, the Guatemalan national anthem underwent a few significant changes. The line “Tinta en sangre tu hermosa bandera/ de mortaja al audaz servirá” (Drenched in blood your beautiful flag/will be the brave’s final shroud) became “Libre al viento tu hermosa bandera/a vencer o a morir llamará” (Free to the wind your beautiful flag/will call to victory or death). In the second verse, “Nuestros padres... te arrancaron del potro sangriento” (Our fathers... rescued you from the bloody horse) was changed to “Nuestros padres...lograron sin choque sangriento...” (Our fathers... achieved in a bloodless battle...). The regime was interested in erasing all references to bloodshed and rebellion; the anti-colonial stance could potentially instill in people’s mind the idea of a revolt against the regime.

But Ubico was not the only dictator to choose peace as a nationalistic trope. In Nicaragua, Anastasio Somoza went even further — or more precisely, backwards — because he returned to the positivistic creed of Orden y Progreso (Order and Progress). Peace was imposed by decree so that prosperity could be achieved. In 1939, a contest was called to choose a new national anthem. The

guidelines were clear: “hablar únicamente sobre la paz y el trabajo” (talk only about peace and work), avoiding any references to war or uprising at a time when the country transitioned from occupation by the United States to dictatorship. The winner of the contest, poet Salomón Ibarra Mayorga, opted for a religious hymn that would move away from the “bellicose” influence of “La Marseillaise,” which had been the paradigm of many national anthems around the world.

The vast majority of national anthems from all over the world stems from two sources: “La Marseillaise” and “God Save The King.” In other words, national anthems tend to be either military marches or religious hymns. In Latin America, national anthems written after independence from Spain — those of Chile, Argentina, Peru, Colombia, and Venezuela, for example — are military marches. In the case of Central America, the anthems of Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, and El Salvador are also clearly military marches, while those from Nicaragua and Costa Rica are religious hymns.

Panama poses an interesting case. The music of the national anthem is a military march, but the lyrics are aligned with the tenets of positivism: “Es preciso cubrir con un velo / del pasado el calvario y la cruz” (It is an imperative to cover with a veil / the suffering and the cross from the past). The ground is covered in flowers, the light of human fraternity illuminates the sky, and progress caresses the land. People should not dwell on the past, but pick up “la pica y la pala” (the hoe and the shovel) and work the land “sin más dilación” (without delay).

Forgetting the bloody past and stressing the importance of working for a better future had to do with a government policy of economic development. The country was ready for business. The national anthem of Costa Rica also stresses the importance of working the land, specifically the land around the Valle Central, which becomes the axis not only of development, but of nationhood. The emblematic figure of that development imagined by the elite is “un labriego sencillo” (a humble peasant) who lives in the Valle Central. The coast is excluded and with it, its African-descendent inhabitants. Costa Rica is, according to this narrative, a homogenous nation, without any racial obstacles — also denying the existence of any indigenous population — that could hinder progress and detract foreign investment. The national anthem declares, once again, that the country is ready for business.

Needless to say, the “humble peasant” is male. Like other minorities, women were excluded from the national discourse, as nations were masculine projects. When they

appear, as in the national anthem of Honduras, it is in the image of the “india virgen” (virgin Indian girl) who is seduced by Columbus, the brave sailor who impregnates her. Both women and nature are objects of desire ready to be possessed. They give birth to new subjects and to the new prosperity at the core of positivism.

Positivism swept through Latin America, from the Mexican “Científicos” to the “Campana del desierto” in Argentina. Land was to be cleared, obstacles (meaning the indigenous population) were to be removed (i.e., exterminated, like the Quilmes in Argentina). The insidious creed of positivism filtered through patriotic stanzas that children learned in school and, not surprisingly, still lingers; such is the case of Brazil’s national motto, “Ordem e Progresso” (Order and Progress), adopted in 1889 at the height of Auguste Comte’s influence in the region and inscribed on the Brazilian flag.

Through order and progress, positivism sought to achieve happiness, the common good for the majority. Like peace, happiness became a mandate. Most national anthems from Central America, except those from Honduras and Belize, adhere to the notions that the “Pursuit of Happiness” is the ultimate goal and that the

state should ensure the well-being of its citizens. Happiness was linked intrinsically to prosperity. The progress of the nation ensured individual progress and vice-versa. How could this objective be achieved? By a strong government determined to eliminate any obstacle that stood in the way of progress. Imposing happiness as a decree was also a way to “cubrir con un velo” (cover with a veil) any social issues from the past or the present as well as any form of dissent.

### Reinterpreting the Nation

Nineteenth-century mentality, with feudalism at its roots, is undisguised in these national anthems, but no longer understood by the majority. A call to defend the nation from a colonial invader or a call to work the land with hoe and shovel may not make much sense now. But these discourses have found new arenas and new meanings over time, be it a street protest or, especially, a football match, in which the players become soldiers who defend their nation’s honor.

The 2009 coup d’état in Honduras gave new meaning to the national anthem. While the de facto government hurried to “legitimize” its power in congress, the national team played a football World Cup qualifying match in

Protests following the 2009 coup in Honduras.



Photo by Yamil Gonzales.

North Carolina. The national anthem was performed at both events, practically at the same time. Patriotism, or an interpretation of it, was at play in both cases. Football became another distraction, particularly considering the importance of the match. Thus, nationalism was performed using a 19<sup>th</sup>-century rhetoric that was employed with different purposes.

Another interpretation of the Honduran anthem appeared when people took to the streets, and soon after, singer Karla Lara recorded a new version replacing the military march with the style of revolutionary Cuba's *Nueva Trova*. In this version of the national anthem, the colonial oppressor is replaced by the *golpistas* who had just seized power by force. It was another way to perform patriotism, selecting what people should remember, in this case, the authoritarian regime the country was plunging into.

It is fascinating to see how a patriotic song based on 19<sup>th</sup>-century paradigms can find ways to never go out of fashion. At the core is the role played by the national pedagogical discourse, which instills in children's minds an idea of nation that, subconsciously, becomes an integral part of their nationalism. It does not matter that the lyrics

are old fashioned or full of clichés, what's important is their spirit.

Nationalism is based on the idea that individuals belong to a nation that is unique or even better than the rest. An entrenched sense of exclusivity is a tenet of nationalism. National anthems are not the exception. It is fairly common to hear people say that their national anthem is the best or the most beautiful in the world. In Central America, people will say that their national anthem is second best only to "La Marseillaise." This assertion is not based on any aesthetic consideration, but on a claim to exclusivity. By the same token, some countries will have the best football team, the best beaches, the best food, and so on. Making these claims is essential to the performance of patriotism.

### YouTubeing the Nation

In recent times, nationalism has undergone a rapid process of digitization. Patriotism is now performed online, opening a new arena that turns anonymous individuals into political subjects. This phenomenon has had a significant impact on the role played by national anthems as vehicles to redefine both national and cultural

National pride is at stake when a Panamanian player defends against Ecuador.



Photo by César Muñoz/Andrés.



Photo by Shawn Millin.

Historic architecture becomes another facet of national pride, as in this town square in Granada, Nicaragua.

identity, particularly for people living away from their countries of origin.

National anthems and immigration feed one another's need to find a new sense of belonging to a nation that was left behind. Nations are YouTubed through video and written postings of the national anthem. Videos are based, like the anthems themselves, on a selective representation of what a country is and what it offers. Individuals are interested in showcasing three main elements: natural beauty, the colonial past (and the indigenous past, in a few cases, but mainly as folklore), and the country's modern constructions.

Architecture plays an important role, highlighting both the Spanish heritage and a new take on modernization. This aspect is interesting because during the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, modernization was key to turning the country away from the colonial past; it was a capitalist stance against the feudal past. New avenues, boulevards, government buildings, theatres, and so on appeared, breaking away from the closed mentality of the *hacienda*. In other words, the colonial patio was opened to make way for broad avenues that would carry the country into modernity. The prevailing style was

neoclassicism, which rested upon columns that were as solid as the image of the nation being portrayed. YouTube videos put modernity — with its icons of modern bridges and glass buildings — and colonial architecture at the same level of nationalistic pride. National anthems provide background music, transforming image and music into symbols of nationalism.

The YouTube videos see natural beauty with the same sense of pride, adding the marketing aspect of tourism: here is what the country offers; here is what is waiting for you on your holiday. Nature is again useful; it is viewed from a utilitarian perspective, but the hoe and the shovel have been replaced by suntan lotion and tropical drinks. National anthems celebrate nature's beauty but view it mainly as a natural resource, the place from which development will begin to take shape. The national anthem of Belize exemplifies this duality of both beauty and usefulness: "Nature has blessed thee with wealth untold, / O'er mountains and valleys where prairies roll." In a third role played by nature, the countryside becomes a battlefield. Men are called to work the land and to fight to defend it to the point of giving their lives for it: "Arise! ye sons of the Baymen's clan, / Put on your armor, clear the land!"

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National Anthem of Belize - 'Land of the Free'  
16,476 views



Himno Nacional De El Salvador ( National Anthem Of El Salvador)  
1,891 views



HIMNO DE PANAMA TVN CANAL 2 Y TV MAX CANAL 9 2012



Himno Nacional de Costa Rica (con letra)



Himno Nacional de Nicaragua

Patriotic symbols serve as backdrops to national anthems on YouTube.

or beaches, these dishes act as national synecdoches. A country's pride and uniqueness rest upon them. All these elements are as exclusive as the national anthem and the countries themselves.

The country that was left behind is reassembled through a selection of specific elements that speak both to the individual who organizes them and to the cyber community that comes together around each video. It is a nationalistic reconstruction based on nostalgia, and it rests upon what Michael Billig calls "banal nationalism," which puts gallo pinto and pupusas at the same level as colonial architecture and beaches. All of them become as essential as the emblems upon which each nation was founded: the flag, the coat of arms, etc.

In the realm of cyberspace, the anthems and the individuals who perform them transcend the geographic and discursive limits of the nation as well as the traditional places of performance, such as a civic ceremony, a schoolyard, or a football stadium. The renderings of the anthems have undergone an endless process of transformation, to the point of becoming global entities, rather than just local and selective representations of the homeland, which is the main role they were meant to play at the time of composition. By helping immigrants reconceptualize their belonging to their countries of origin, national anthems are transnational entities that bring together issues of

music, nationalism, immigration, and cultural and virtual identities in a globalized world.

Even though they were composed towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as part of the foundational discourses that appeared as most Latin American nations were coming to terms with their own identities, the virtual renderings of the national anthems contribute to an understanding of the way in which immigrants perceive their relationship with the countries they left behind, creating a long-distance nationalism rooted in a nostalgic representation of the homeland. Videos posted on YouTube and the discussions they generate reveal a great deal about the way in which immigrants re-enact their patriotic and civic identities through transnational digital networks.

Returning to Renan's definition, videos are based on a selection of things someone chooses to remember and things that are best to forget. None of the videos, for instance, plays the national anthem with images of misery, violence, or militarism in the background. This approach is no different from that of Ubico or Somoza. To paraphrase the Panamanian anthem, it is imperative to put a veil over things that would put the country to shame. Like the expression of nationalism at a football match or during a street demonstration, this new online identity of

A children's marching band in Costa Rica.



Photo by MadriCK

the national anthem repeats nationalistic paradigms of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, thus making it evident that these very dated and poorly written lyrics still hold sway.

Nationalism is performed in acts of reckless pride, sentimentality, or patriotic nostalgia that re-enact a mythical and historical narrative transmitted by the national pedagogical discourse. National anthems are an ideological invention that constructs collective memory. Their sublime and selective representation of national history promotes good citizenship, individual sacrifice, and national pride. Despite being epic and romantic discourses whose bucolic and warlike undertones could be considered anachronistic, national anthems turn people into a unified political subject. The mediums used to express patriotism and nationalism have changed over time, but the spirit of the discourse — handed down from regimes that could have never imagined the future of the nations they sought to create — prevails.

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