

Victorious Change: Contesting Common Views of Spain's Islamic Past through Sport

Traditionally, events memorializing Spain's Islamic past are centered on warfare. Grand accounts of glorious battles for the "soul of Spain" are common in annual fiestas with reenactments of Christian soldiers pushing back invading Muslims. Reenactments of the "re-conquest" of the peninsula reinforce the placement of Islam as "other", an enemy driven out under a banner of perceived religious and cultural unity. Events such as the *moros y cristianos* (Moors and Christians) festivals commonly focus on a past of intentional segregation and exile which immortalizes Islam as foreign despite being deeply woven into Spain's historical fabric. In opposition to this traditional representation, the Aben Humeya Morisco Games in Purchena, Spain offer another perspective of Spain's relationship with Islam. Recalling one of the final rebellions between the King of Granada and the Spanish Crown, the contemporary Morisco games, or *Juegos Moriscos*, do not revisit narratives on the battlefield but rather the events following them. Sporting activities and performances during the weekend-long celebration mirror the festivities taking place after the brief victory of Aben Humeya and his followers during the Morisco Rebellion.

The Morisco Games commemorate Purchena's heritage focusing on the narrative of Aben Humeya primarily, one of the last kings of Granada. Born Fernando de Valor in 1520, Aben Humeya is the Hispanicized version of the Arabic name, Muhammed ibn Umayyah. A descendent of the Umayyads, Aben Humeya had been made king in an effort to gain momentum for the rebellion against continuing oppression of Moriscos in Spain. A brief history of Aben Humeya's time as king is provided in the 2014 flyer, giving a vivid portrait of the event honoring his victory in Purchena:

*The King of Granada conquered Purchena, where the victory was marked with lavish games. There were dancing contests for couples and for women only, poetry and singing challenges, wrestling, jumping and weight-lifting competitions, stone-throwing and marksmanship, either with arquebuses, crossbows or slingshots, in which the Moriscos of al-Andalus competed with Turks and Berbers for the love of the ladies and for the important prizes the King offered to the winners: horses, gold-embroidered garments, scimitars, laurel crowns and dozens of sovereigns and gold ducats (from *The Hand of Fatima* by Falcones de Sierra, 2011).*

The contemporary games began in the summer of 1993 as the *fiestas y juegos en Espana* with only a few sporting events intended for interested locals. Due to its initial popularity, the town council saw the potential benefit for continuing the games and another event was held in 1997. Inspired by the book *La Guerra de los moriscos: segunda parte de las guerras civiles de Granada* written by historian Ginés Pérez de Hita in 1619, the *Juegos Moriscos de Aben Humeya* became an annual event and for many years their popularity grew. Following the 2008 recession, however, Spain suffered a devastating economic blow. Second only to Greece, their unemployment rate rose dramatically leaving a large portion of the population without work. In Andalucía, the autonomous region of which Purchena is a part, the economic crisis was especially destructive. Due to financial constraints, it was unclear if the

games would continue. Through the website Change.org, an online petition was created to raise awareness and assist in procuring funding for the games. Eventually, the decision was made to hold the games on a bi-annual basis and today, they are still held every other year.

From the beginning, Manolo Sola, a Purchena resident and the local librarian, has played a central role in making sure that the games are a prominent part of village life. Due to his efforts in organizing, securing funds, and building the games to where they stand today, it seems appropriate that Sola play the part of King Aben Humeya during the weekend-long event. Activities begin on Friday with children's games followed by wrestling in the plaza. Once the first stage of wrestling is complete, the Arabian items and gastronomic markets (much like a food court) are opened. Material goods and foods from a variety of ethnic origins are available for purchase from tents and tables lining the streets. After a few hours of eating and shopping, it is time for the procession of the king, the raising of the flags and the final wrestling match, presided over by the king and his court. Dressed in a luxuriously designed costume fit for a king, Sola leads a procession down the streets of town to the plaza, officially starting the games. He is followed by an entourage of officials, musicians, soldiers, and dancers, all dressed in elaborate, colorful costumes that add to the regal splendor of the occasion. At around midnight, the first evening wraps with flamenco and Arabic music and dance. Saturday begins with the opening of the markets and the start of the half-league race, a distance of 12 kilometers, beginning and ending in the town square. Another parade heads up the "Moorish Challenge" consisting of several different sporting activities: stone lifting, sling shot, brick lifting, shot put, long jump and throwing of stones. The evening winds down with more music and dancing. The last day of the games has a similar schedule but with the final event, ribbon horse racing. The object of this race is to grab a ribbon hanging from a wire strung high in the air while riding on horseback as fast as possible. The event is exciting and a rousing end to the games. As always, the night ends with a final musical performance. Throughout the weekend, other events such as art workshops, historical seminars, tours and exhibits are offered. Each provides information about Morisco history and its connection to Spain and Purchena specifically.

Infrastructure has grown from the money that is brought in from the games with the construction of a sports plaza and accommodations for the growing number of visitors each year. Visitors come from all over Europe (I met many British citizens during my visit) and other regions such as North Africa and the Middle East. Each year brings new interest and opportunities to connect and learn. Sola has worked to produce several texts about the history of Purchena and the Moriscos. This includes drawing attention to the work of Albert Hay Malotte, American composer most famous for his work on *Gone with the Wind* (1939) but is also noted for his play for piano, *Fiesta en Purchena* (1938) honoring the historic Morisco Games.

Preserving the games and sharing their historical and cultural significance to the town and the country in general is a priority. What they have come to represent for Purchena, and by extension, for Spain, extends beyond participation in the event to what the games reveal about Spain's relationship with Islam and the integral part that Moriscos play in connecting with a profoundly fragmented past that other festivals such as the *moros y cristianos* have typically reinforced. Despite the changes that have occurred over more than 20 years, the Aben Humeya Morisco Games endure. Like *moros y cristianos*,

they place significant value on historic events but the similarities end there. The Morisco Games go beyond the battlefield to celebrate a past that many people may have forgotten or simply deny as part of Spanish culture. However, due to the efforts of Manolo and the town of Purchena, an increasing number of individuals now embrace it. Weightlifting, archery, dancing and wrestling are less about the conflict between Islam and Catholicism and more about the significance of sportsmanship and competition in the context of cultural awareness. The games are not only observing culture through sport but also cultivating a new understanding of the past and the contribution of Islam to Spanish heritage. No matter if it is a measure of strength, endurance, or skill, the games bring people together for competition beyond conflict.

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