

The Social Relevance of *El Cid* in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar is considered as a national hero of Spain who fought with Muslims and Christians to protect the kingdom of Castilian. He is popularly known as *El Cid* or *El Campeador* in the world of Spanish Literature and is the main and real protagonist of the significant medieval Spanish epic poem *El Cantar de Mio Cid*. The epic work describes the military and socio-political life of El Cid from the exile in 1081 till his death in 1099. It is based on the real and fictional character of the national hero Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar. This research will try to analyse the military and socio-political life of El Cid through the perspective of “Convivencia” (Co-existence) and how his life reflects other lives in the 11th Century as well as the 21st Century. It also looks at how *El Cid* played a vital role in combining the social values irrespective of religion and lineage. It also aims to examine the factual and fictional historicity of *El Cid*. The purpose of this research is to offer a concise interpretation of the El Cid’s life and how his social values influence the lives of common people, serving as an example of humanity and co-existence in times of combat and violence in the 11th century and why he is relevant in the 21st century.

Keywords: Cantar de Mio Cid, Spanish Literature, Convivencia, Socio-political and Military Life of El Cid, Relevance, 21st century

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to discuss substantive issues related to the life of El Cid through historical events and the medieval epic oeuvre *El Cantar de Mio Cid* that emphasises the factual and fictional historical occurrences from the exile of Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar in 1081 to the death of El Cid in 1099. *El Cantar de Mio Cid* (The Song of my Cid) is an epic poem of medieval Spanish literature which presents and discusses the historical events of Medieval Spain along with various socio-political and military aspects of *El Cid*’s life. It is also known as an anonymous *Cantar de gesta* or “song of heroic deeds” which was sung by *juglares* or minstrels, like most epics at that period. Ramón Menéndez Pidal was one of the eminent writers, novelists, and scholars of Spanish medieval literature who included *El Cantar* in a specific genre. “*El Cantar de Mio Cid*, in the popular tradition

he termed the *Mester de Juglaría*, and it refers to the medieval tradition according to which popular poems were passed down from generation to generation¹.

El Cid is a poetic name that is frequently used in Medieval Spanish literature of the eleventh century. He is a very significant protagonist of the Medieval Spanish epic *El Poema de Mio Cid* or *El Cantar del Mio Cid*. Historically, *El Cid*’s life differs in many aspects from the poem. There are many fictional interpretations in the work, but many of them have been considered as true historical events about *El Cid*. Ramón Menéndez Pidal is one of those who advocate the legacy of El Cid as a national hero, but on the other hand, Richard Fletcher argues that the life of El Cid has been glorified in the medieval epic. Fletcher asserts that “The Cid in the Cantar is portrayed as extremely loyal to Alfonso VI, although this was not a trait of the real Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar². He argues that he was not that much fidelity as portrayed

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cantar_de_mio_Cid.

2. Fletcher, Richard A. *The Quest for El Cid*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. Print.

in the *Cantar*.

According to the historical documents, *El Cid* was a Castilian nobleman and military leader of medieval Spain in the kingdom of Ferdinand I of Castile and León. He was brought to the court of Ferdinand I when he was 14 years old and began working as a military assistant to Prince Sancho II. After some years, the Cid was considered a brave militant who fought for the dignity of the regime of King Ferdinand I. The fidelity and faith of Rodrigo Diaz de Vivar to the regime of the King of Castile and Leon were highly appreciated.

El nombre de su padre era Diego Láinez y tenía dominio solariego de Vivar. Su padre estaba relacionado con linaje Laín Calvo: uno de los más antiguos de los míticos jueces de Castilla. Después de la muerte de su padre hacia el año 1058 Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar fue educado en las artes de la guerra, ocupación principal de los miembros de su familia y a la edad de catorce pasó a servir al rey de Castilla Fernando I³.

(My Translation: The name of his father was Diego Láinez, and he had dominion of Vivar. His father was related to the Laín Calvo lineage: one of the oldest of the mythical judges of Castile. After the death of his father around 1058, Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar was educated in the arts of war, the main occupation of his family members, and at the age of fourteen, he went on to serve the King of Castile, Ferdinand I)

There is no evidence about El Cid's place or date of birth, but in medieval literature, his birth is shown in 1041 according to Menéndez Pidal, a medieval Spanish historian. But most of the sources and historians consider that he was probably born in the year 1043 in the village of Vivar, which is located seven kilometres from the city of Burgos and died in 1099, as Colin Smith states that "The song was written several years back, considering the historical Cid died in 1099"⁴.

El Cid and his wife Jiménez had a son and two daughters. His son and heir, Diego Rodriguez, died on the battlefield of Consuegra in 1097 when he was fighting against the Almoravids. The eldest daughter Cristina

Rodriguez married the Prince of Navarre; the young daughter, Maria Rodriguez was married to Ramón Berenguer III, Count of Barcelona. But there were many historical events like that are not mentioned in the great literary epic *El Cantar del Mio Cid*. Despite an anonymous author, an authentic date of composition and an unknown place of birth, none of the historians or scholars can deny or reject the factual shred of evidence that El Cid had his proper family, which is mentioned above. Apart from this fact, it is also mentioned in the history of medieval Spain that El Cid indeed was exiled from the Kingdom of Castile and Leon. As Fletcher admits, "The Cid in history was indeed exiled by Alfonso VI; he did defeat the count of Barcelona, he did capture Valencia, and he was victorious over the Almoravides"⁵. This shows that El Cid had a definite and real history in medieval Spain.

METHODOLOGY

It has been observed that many historians and scholars have written several fictional and nonfictional books that are based on the socio-political and military life of El Cid or Rodriguez Díaz de Vivar, who lived in medieval Spain. *Cantar de Mio Cid*, a medieval epic, is used as a primary source of study to analyse the heroic life of El Cid. A part from the medieval literature, numerous research works, historical texts and films have been examined and explored to justify and support the results and arguments of the research title.

A qualitative approach has been used to analyse the social, political and historical context of medieval Spain in which El Cid lived and served his kingdom of Castile.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The historical context can help to understand the social and political life of El Cid, along with the battles of the Iberian Peninsula in the eleventh century. In a broad sense, we have to understand the social, political and economic division of Iberian society. The Spanish peninsula was divided into two blocks; Christian Spain and Muslim Spain (Al-Andalus) that were identified by

3. <http://www.mcncbiografias.com/app-bio/do/show?key=diaz-de-vivar-rodrigo>. December 20, 2025.

4. Smith, Colin. *The Making of the Poem de Mio Cid*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1983. ISBN 9780521249928. Print.

5. Fletcher, Richard A. *The Quest for El Cid*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. Print.

supremacy of power and religious faiths; most parts of the Peninsula was controlled by the Muslim Kings in the early phase of *Conquista* and very few territories were taken under control of the Christian Kingdom through the process of *Reconquista* but once the *Reconquista* started by Christian kingdom then most powerful territories came under the jurisdiction of Christian Spain by the mid of 11th century. Both groups and communities were further subdivided; Christian Spain was formed by the kingdoms of Castile and Leon, Aragon, Navarre and the kingdom of Barcelona, and Al-Andalus was comprised by several small Muslim kingdoms called Taifas, following the rupture of the caliphate of Cordoba in 1031. The main territories of Taifas that bordered the Christian kingdoms were Valencia, Toledo, Zaragoza, and Badajoz. Valencia is a city that has a more significant role in the life of El Cid. During the eleventh century, Spanish medieval history was known as a history of combat and clash between Christian kings and Muslim kings, but it is true that the conflicts and combats also took place within the same blocks and communities, which itself criticises Samuel Huntington's theory *The Clash of Civilisations*, which promulgates that different civilisations clash with each other.

In the history of medieval Spanish literature, two names, *El Cid* (The Lord) and *El Campeador* (The Champion), are more popular and prominent than the name Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar. These names were given by the Moors and Christians, respectively, and both have different meanings. The name *El Cid* (The Lord) is also symbolic of assistance to Muslims who were protected by *El Cid* in the battles between Christians and Moors. *El Cid* is also a literary name that documents his relations with Muslims or Moors. The name *El Campeador* means the great Castilian gentleman of the King of Spain, and it is also considered a symbol of loyalty, patriotism, Christians and Christianity. Richard A. Fletcher had different opinions about the events which are mentioned in the work *El Cantar de Mio Cid*, and he stated that:

The emphasis on Castilian identity does not necessarily mirror the historical relationship that the Cid had with the Castilian community. In historical records such as the *Historia Roderici*, the Cid spends a lot of time campaigning in the Ebro Valley and Levante. This specific history pays less attention to the significance of Castile in Cid's military career⁶.

In his work *The Quest for El Cid*, Richard Fletcher criticised that in the oeuvre *El Cantar de Mio Cid*, the presentation of Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar as a vassal very loyal to King Alfonso is not correct because many times El Cid was against the king and his decision. Fletcher also mentions that Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar is a symbol of faith and humanity, only for Christians and Christianity, but not for Muslims. But this paper slightly differs from the view of Richard Fletcher on the life of Castile's vassal *El Cid* because throughout his military career, El Cid played vital roles in different situations, and accordingly, he acted well, keeping in mind his duties toward well-being for the nation, fraternity, honour, fidelity, and coexistence in particular. Sometimes he seemed very cruel and hostile behaviours toward Muslims, which is only in war, but he applies the same intensity of revenge towards Christians too. It would be unfair to label him only as a symbol of Christians and Christianity.

The life of legendary Spanish hero El Cid can be analysed and divided into two time zones; first, before his exile in which he started his military career in the regime of King Fernando I and was known as Rodrigo Diaz de Vivar and after the death of King Alfonso I, his elder son Prince Sancho II crowned as a King of Castile II in 1065 and it was the most powerful province in the Iberian Peninsula than Leon and Galicia whose rulers were Prince Alfonso VI y Prince Garcia, respectively. In the regime of Prince Sancho II, Rodrigo Diaz De Vivar worked as the most powerful military vassal, and he was known as the most loyal and allegiance vassal of Castile. Moreover, he was considered one of the closest friends of Prince Sancho II and helped him a lot in the different battlegrounds against Christians and Muslims. Even El Cid also defended his King Sancho II when Prince Alfonso attempted to kill his elder brother, Prince Sancho II, in the race to become the first king of Castile. In 1071 and 1072, King Sancho II, along with his brave and courageous military commander El Cid, defeated his brothers Garcia and Alfonso VI in the battle of Golpejera, respectively, and he won the Leon and Galicia provinces. Unfortunately, when King Sancho II died in 1072, Prince Alfonso automatically became the King of the new joint province of Castile and Leon. Even El Cid unwillingly had to work with King Alfonso, with whom he had previously confronted in the various battles earlier, but now he was under the control of new leadership, in which

6. Fletcher, Richard A. *The Quest for El Cid*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. Print.

he had to demonstrate and prove his fidelity towards the kingship and its people. In the reign of Alfonso VI, El Cid found himself subtly isolated from the major decisions of the king. Despite this ignorance and negligence from King Alfonso VI, he continued to serve his majesty with the same intensity of love, loyalty, courage and honesty for the new statehood and its king. Second, after his exile from the kingdom of Alfonso VI. He had struggled a lot to gain his honour, at least that he had during the period of Prince Sancho II, but he did not succeed in achieving it, and he had been exiled. Moreover, he had been seen as a betrayal, an unfaithful and suspicious vassal of Castile and Leon. This attitude of hatred and dishonour towards El Cid continued for a long time, and finally, it led to his exile from Castile and Leon in 1081. When he was exiled, King Alfonso ordered that those who would have tried to help or give him any kind of assistance had to be treated equally. It is considered the second phase of El Cid's life. When he had been exiled from the kingdom, he mourned for his wife and daughters, whom he had left with the king Alfonso VI. This particular event shows that El Cid also loved and cared for his family, and he got hurt while feeling separated from them, but when situations remind him to be brave and strong, he can be very ruthless. Despite being banished, he continued to express his love, gratitude, fidelity, allegiance, and patriotism towards his realm and territories. "The Cid's weeping portrays him as a passionate and loving man towards his family. When a situation calls for him to be strong and brave, he can be ruthless. He can be a fierce warrior as well as a tender husband and father"⁷. Since he was banished from the province, he won many battles against Muslims and Christians to restore his honour and value. During his exiled period, El Cid won the various small cities of the Muslim regime as well as the Christian Kingdom, but two of them have been discussed in this paper. First, on his way to conquer Valencia, his first obstacle was the ruler of Barcelona, Berenguer Ramon II, a Christian king who fought with El Cid, and he defeated and captured Berenguer Ramon II in the battle of Tébar, but nowadays it is known as Pinar de Tébar. Second, the victory of Valencia, which was the Muslim regime of Al-Qadir, portrays El Cid as a symbol of loyalty, fraternity,

and coexistence. He conquered and captured various cities in the name of King Alfonso VI, and he used to send booty, a pariah to his fidelity and allegiance. "The Cid is exiled; he still sends horses and treasures to King Alfonso VI during his military campaigns. After he overthrows Alcoçer, he sends thirty horses to Alfonso VI. When he conquers Valencia, he sends booty to the King"⁸. Valencia is the city that was conquered and besieged by El Cid in command of a combined Christian and Muslim army, and ruled from the beginning of 1092 to 1094. Till 1092, El Cid had gained his popularity and was considered one of the valiant warriors and military commanders, and he was capable enough to run his conquered cities along with Valencia. Even though he had the courage and power to challenge the king Alfonso VI, he did not do that because he had to restore his honour, dignity and prove his loyalty and honesty to his motherland and its majesty.

During the five years of Valencia's rule, El Cid played an important role in uniting the society in terms of co-existence and togetherness among different faiths and religions, especially between Muslims and Christians. "He won the city of Valencia in battle and ruled there more or less independently from Alfonso, establishing a culturally pluralistic state with the popular support of both Christians and Muslims"⁹. There are several examples that show El Cid lived and ruled independently from the king, but he used to send financial aid to his kingdom to demonstrate his loyalty and patriotism. El Cid was capable enough to reign over the conquered cities of the Peninsula because he had the strongest combined army troops with Muslims and Christians; even several small Muslim kings or Taifas considered him their Lord who helped them in the battles against Christians, but he never revolted against his king and his kingdom.

If you examine and compare the socio-political and religious values in terms of peace, harmony and coexistence between different religious faiths in the period of Conquista (Conquer) and Reconquista (Reconquer) then you would find that 9th, 10th and mid of the 11th centuries of Islamic Spain were sometimes described as religious and ethnic tolerance and religious harmony among Muslims, Christians, and Jews.

7. Chaney, Emily, "The Role of El Cid in Medieval Spanish Culture and Epic Literature" (2013). *Honors Theses*. Paper 2383.

8. Alfante, Azariah. *El Cantar de Mio Cid: The functions of blending fact and fiction in a communal epic*. Web. Dec. 20, 2025.

9. Chaney, Emily, "The Role of El Cid in Medieval Spanish Culture and Epic Literature" (2013). *Honors Theses*. Paper 2383

The distinguished historian Bernard Lewis wrote that the situation of Christians and Jews, non-Muslims in Islamic Spain, was a kind of second-class citizenship:

Second-class citizenship, though second-class, is a kind of citizenship. It involves some rights, but not all, and it is surely better than no rights at all...

...A recognized status, albeit one of inferiority to the dominant group, which is established by law, recognized by tradition, and confirmed by popular assent, is not to be despised¹⁰.

Spanish medieval society was stratified, and Christians and Jews were considered citizens of the second class of the time. This citation reveals the concept of the coexistence of three different cultures during that time, although in no way were the rights the same. There was also a flourishing of a culture that had elements of various religious communities.

The Muslim period in Spain is often described as a 'golden age' of learning where libraries, colleges, public baths were established and literature, poetry and architecture flourished. Both Muslims and non-Muslims made major contributions to this flowering of culture¹¹.

Islamic Spain was considered to practice religious tolerance because the Jews and the Christians really had little freedom under Muslim rule, under certain rules. Before the 1050s, the non-Muslims of Islamic Spain were treated better than the Christians in Spain during the Reconquista period after the 1050s.

However, it is also true and cannot be denied that all the Muslim rulers of medieval Spain were not tolerant. Almanzor was a Taifa kingdom with a very intolerant king. Almanzor destroyed the churches and imposed strict restrictions on Christians and Jews. The position of non-Muslims in Spain deteriorated considerably from the mid-eleventh century as the rulers became the strictest and Islam came under great pressure from abroad.

But if we analyse the period of Medieval Spain by the mid-11th century, it is considered one of the most tolerant societies of middle age in which all religions lived

together and shared their language, customs, and social values. In other words, the era of El Cid can be viewed as the idea of *Convivencia* or coexistence among three religions: Christians, Muslims, and Jews. Originally, the concept of *Covivencia* was popularised in 1948 by the Spanish philologist and historian Américo Castro in his massively influential work, *España en su historia*.

In the context of Spanish history, *the convivencia* is an idea that attempts to describe the complex and interconnected nature of social organization between the people of the three major Abrahamic faiths operating within the historical and geographical proximity of the medieval Iberian Peninsula¹².

Through the concept of *the convivencia* El Cid can be presented as one of the greatest disciples of this idea of togetherness. In the larger context, El Cid was the defender of fraternity among Christians and Muslims. There are many verses in the work *El Cantar de Mio Cid* which advocate the idea of coexistence and togetherness in the 11th century. El Cid played a very important role in the battle of Graus in 1063 against the conquest of King Ramiro I of Aragon and defended the sovereignty of the Muslim king of Zaragoza. It was one of the most serious events in the history of the life of Cid that presented a friendship between the Kingdom of Castile and the Kingdom of Zaragoza. These events also show the concept of coexistence between two communities of Christians and Muslims. It is not the only incident that was omitted in the work *El Cantar de Mio Cid*; there were others as well. These were the fight against King García de Galicia in 1071 and the confrontation with his younger brother King Alfonso VI de León. The life and history of Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar approach us in different ways because historians and authors present it in various colours, sometimes in historical and sometimes imaginary contexts. The story of the life of Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar is debatable in the history and literature of Spain. His life was afflicted with various difficulties in the war between the two groups of Christians and Muslims.

10. Lewis, Bernard. *The Jews of Islam*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984. Print.

11. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/spain_1.shtml>. Web. March 10, 2026.

12. Baker, Gregory. *Manipulating the Medieval Past: Convivencia and the Politics of Religious Identity*. Oregon: Western Oregon University, 2015. Web. November 25, 2025. <http://digitalcommons.wou.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1043&context=his>

Conclusion

According to the historical documents and the above-discussed fact and fiction, we may say that Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar was a secular figure of the medieval society of Spain in the tenth century and the mid-eleventh century because the Cid always helped the Moors and Christians in parallel by virtue of his duty. Sometimes he fought against Christian kings to protect the Moors, but mostly he fought against Muslim rulers. But the combat was mainly between the armies of two different kingships. Once the king or army won the territory in the battle, the people of that region were treated well with some restrictions, and they were considered as real inhabitants of the combined territories, and the conquered people had to pay some booty and tributes to the king who conquered them. He is a very practical military vassal who does not want to kill the entire people who are against him or his faith; he conquers the territories for the tributes and pariahs that can be sent to the king. "The Cid is a practical man, preferring to allow the people he conquers to pay him tribute rather than slaughter entire populations of Muslims"¹³. This particular incident reflects that El Cid is not a *matador* (killer) of the Muslims.

Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar (El Cid) belonged to a family of minor nobility in Spain. He was one of the most important characters in Spanish medieval literature and history of the 11th century and was a legendary, historical figure and literary character who had a significant and profound influence on the socio-political life of the people of the Iberian Peninsula. He is considered the national hero of Spain and a symbol of fidelity, peace, faith, patriotism, and *convivencia* (coexistence) where all three different communities, faiths and their cultures would live together in a particular period of the 11th century. But the life of El Cid cannot be confined and restricted within one society, nation, and one specific period of time. He is a timeless hero because his social, political and military virtues are omnipresent, and it can be seen in the 20th century, the rise of General Francisco Franco's fascist and dictatorial regime in Spain. Franco considered himself the defender of Christianity and a true patriot for his nation, as El Cid has been portrayed in the epic work *El Cantar de Mio Cid*. But the deeds of Franco in the Civil War and post-war were completely against the ideas and virtues that El Cid had during the 11th century. "The Cid's

example lent itself well to the agenda of Francisco Franco in his rise to power at the beginning of the twentieth century"¹⁴. The fidelity and honour of El Cid have become a foundation for a nationalistic spirit in Spain that has seen and persisted throughout the ages. The character of El Cid can be formed in accordance with someone's belief and ideology. It might be positive and negative for the human being.

El Cid is also quite relevant in the 21st century, where his socio-political, fidelity, allegiance, honour, love, togetherness, and patriotism will help to eradicate the hatred, violence and suppression against others' faith, class, military and caste (in India). In the context of Indian nationalism or patriotism in the 21st century is leading towards incorporating a particular group of ideology in which different ideologies are being considered as a so-called threat to the nation or national security. This notion of nationalism or patriotism excludes the majority of the people who have dissenting views. In this context, we can propagate the notion of the *convivencia* and patriotism of El Cid that includes the people who have different religions, beliefs and ideologies.

If we look to the Arab World, we find political tensions, military conflicts and disputes between the same religions but different sects, such as Sunni and Shia. In recent years, their relations have been increasingly marked by disputes and conflicts. In the 11th century the fights and conflicts had taken place between same or different religions and groups to rule other's territories for the power of hegemony and to strengthen its political and economic power but nowadays, especially in Arab countries they fight not to gain political or military powers; however, they fight to destroy each one's life and existence as Christians did through the process of Inquisition where those who have other faith and religion had been massacred and converted into Christianity but El Cid was not in the favour of destroying or killing the innocent people but he aimed to rule and protect them in the cost of money and tributes. Being a warrior and military vassal, he propagates the idea of heterogeneity where the society and politics incorporate different religions, beliefs, and classes with the notion of fraternity and coexistence.

This research paper embodies the 11th century's socio-political, *convivencia* (coexistence) and patriotic

13. Chaney, Emily. "The Role of el Cid in Medieval Spanish Culture and Epic Literature" (2013). *Honors Theses*. Paper 2383.

14. Chaney, Emily. "The Role of el Cid in Medieval Spanish Culture and Epic Literature" (2013). *Honors Theses*. Paper 2383.

deeds and wisdom of El Cid in the context of the 21st century. It also describes that his heroic deeds and wisdom inspire the people of the 21st century to assimilate different religions, classes and castes (in India), where everyone has the right to live with dignity, and all diverse people of the country or society have to live together even if one has a different faith and belief.

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13. <https://crisismagazine.com/opinion/el-cid/>
14. <https://aipetcher.wordpress.com/tag/el-cid/>
15. <https://www.roman-catholic-saints.com/el-cid.html>
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