

The Guatemalan conquest: Nahua and Mayan perspectives

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Traditionally, history has been narrated through a Eurocentric lens and omitted indigenous perspectives. When studying Mexican conquest history, Iberians have been the main focus of the discussion. However, recent scholars have refocused their attention on indigenous sources that profoundly reshape the historical narrative. It was not until reading the book *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquests* by Matthew Restall that I learned about the contributions of indigenous people not only in the conquest of the Mexica Empire, but also in the conquest of Guatemala.<sup>1</sup> Florine G.L. Asselbergs in her book *Conquered Conquistadors* focuses on the contributions of indigenous groups in the conquest of Guatemala.<sup>2</sup> This paper seeks to emphasize the agency of indigenous groups in the conquests of Mexico and Guatemala, as the story of their alliance is often ignored and their accomplishments forgotten, as the Iberians' self-proclaimed superiority has marginalized native contributions.

Traditionally, history has attributed the accomplishments of the Mexican conquests to Iberian superiority. It is often narrated that a few hundred Spanish set out to uncharted lands and with their superior resources, such as their steel swords, were able to defeat the mighty Mexica empire. However, historians Laura E. Matthew and Michael R. Oudijk in the first chapter of the book, *Indian Conquistadors* argue that history, “marginalizes the part played by the Tlaxcalans

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquests* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Florine G. L. Asselbergs 2008. *Conquered Conquistadors: The Lienzo de Quauhquechollan : a Nahuatl Vision of the Conquest of Guatemala*. New ed., illustrated ed. Boulder, Colo.: University Press of Colorado.

and other native allies of the invaders.”<sup>3</sup> The Tlaxcalans were one of the rival *altepetl* (city-state) of the Mexicas. They had been at war with the Mexicas for generations and were one of the few *altepeme* that had remained unconquered. When the Iberians arrived, and after about two weeks of battles between both groups, an alliance was created between the Iberians and the Tlaxcalans. Restall and Oudijk utilize a letter written by Pedro Gonzales Najera, a Spanish conquistador, detailing the aid of the Tlaxcalans in the conquest of Tenochtitlan.<sup>4</sup> Gonzales writes that “There came to help in the conquest a great quantity of Indian friends, natives of Tlaxcala, and Mexicans.”<sup>5</sup> He then details that the “Indian friends” were present at all battles and encounters with enemy groups, providing them with their service until all the land was pacified.<sup>6</sup> The Iberians heavily relied on native allies because they were outnumbered by the enemy and therefore needed indigenous warriors to balance the numbers. The number of native warriors that joined forces with the Iberians is still unclear: for example, the ruler of the Tlaxcalans insisted that twenty thousand allies took part in the siege of Tenochtitlan.

The main ally of the Iberians, the Tlaxcalans, left a pictorial record illustrating their accomplishments in the conquest of the Mexica empire. The *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* demonstrates that without the Tlaxcalans, the conquest would likely have had a different outcome. The *lienzo* was painted by the Tlaxcalans on a cotton sheet around 1552 and depicts the creation of the

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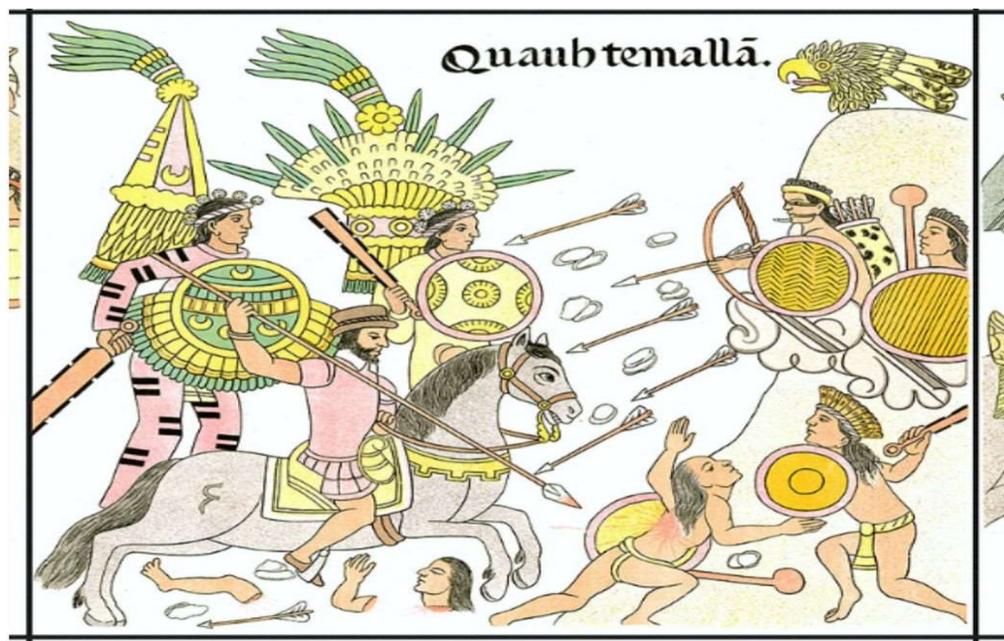
<sup>3</sup> Matthew Restall, Michael Oudijk. “Mesoamerican Conquistadors in the Sixteenth Century.” In *Indian Conquistadors: Indigenous Allies in the Conquest of Mesoamerica*, edited by Laura E. Matthew and Michel R. Oudijk. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

alliance portraying both entities as equal.<sup>7</sup> The *lienzo* also depicts essential events during the conquest, such as the first encounter between the Tlaxcalans and the Iberians, and critical battles including *La Noche Triste*, when the forces of Hernan Cortez were driven out of Tenochtitlan. Of course, the *lienzo* also depicts the fall of the Mexica empire and in general highlights the aid the Tlaxcalans provided to the Iberians in combat. Interestingly, the *lienzo* does not end once the Mexica were defeated, for it portrays further conquest expeditions that occurred throughout Mesoamerica. One cell depicting a conquest expedition in particular that caught my attention was the cell in the *lienzo* depicting the expedition to Guatemala. The Tlaxcalans were not only part in the conquest of the Mexica empire but also present in the first conquest of Guatemala

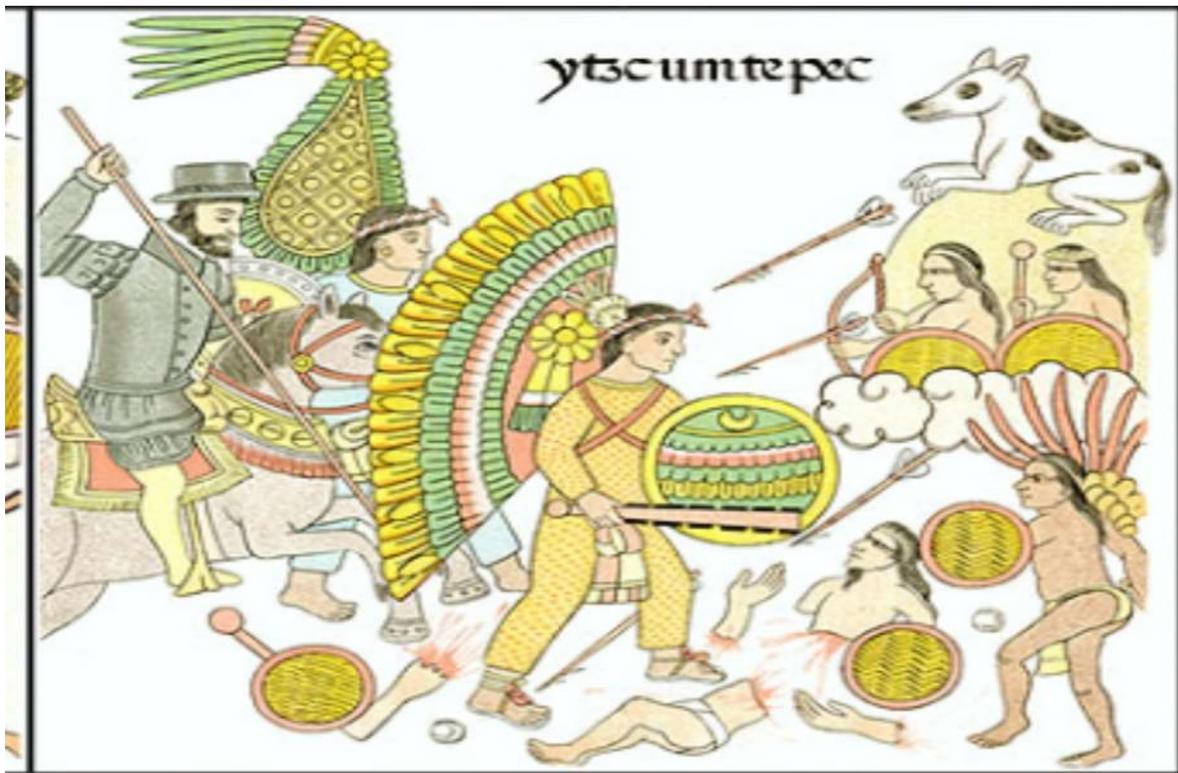


(figure 1).

Figure 1 Nahua forces entering Guatemala along with the Iberians, Cell 79 of the Lienzo de Tlaxcala. The Mesolore Project, Brown University. <http://www.mesolore.org/viewer/view/3/The-Lienzo-de-Tlaxcala#>

<sup>7</sup> Lienzo de Tlaxcala, Mesolore Project,

The *lienzo* depicts the Tlaxcalans front and center along the Iberians battling Maya warriors. Further cells in the *lienzo* depict battles led by Pedro de Alvarado that occurred throughout Guatemala, such as battles at Quetzaltenango, Atitlan, and finally, Solola, which the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* referred to by the Nahuatl name of Ytzcumtepec (figure 2).



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Figure 2 Nahuatl forces entering Ytzcumtepec along with the Iberians, Cell 80 of the Lienzo de Tlaxcala. The Mesolore Project, Brown University. <http://www.mesolore.org/viewer/view/3/The-Lienzo-de-Tlaxcala#>

All of the images show the battles that occurred as the Iberians marched through Guatemala and the combat aid the Tlaxcalans provided, fighting off Maya forces.

Restall and Asselberg, in their book *Invading Guatemala*, compiled a combination of Maya, Nahuatl, and Spanish primary sources that narrate the conquest of Guatemala. Notably, the letters from Alvarado and the Kaqchikels describe the first Spanish invasion of Guatemala led by

Alvarado and his fellow Iberians, with Native allies playing a major role. Alvarado not only depended on Nahua forces to battle Maya groups during the campaigns that took place in 1524, but also created an alliance with one of the most predominant Maya groups in Guatemala: the Kaqchikel. Just like the Tlaxcala-Mexica rivalry, the Kaqchikel and Ki'che were the two predominant rival Maya kingdoms in Guatemala. The Iberians used this rivalry to their advantage and allied themselves with the Kaqchikel. In his letters, Alvarado narrates that he required the Kaqchikels to join him to “hunt them” (the Ki'ches).<sup>8</sup> The Kaqchikel provided Alvarado with four thousand men, and together with the people he had with him he was able to “throw them (The K'iches) out of the entire country.”<sup>9</sup> He then details that, with the help of the Kaqchikel, he moved down to Atitlan and lay siege to another Maya group called the Tz'utujil. The *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* also depicts this event (Figure 3).

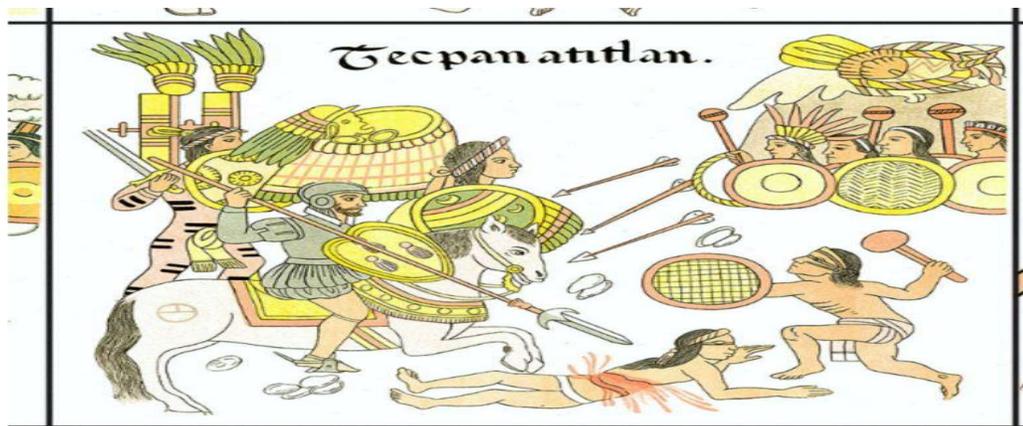


Figure 3 Nahua forces battling T'zutujil, Cell 78 of the Lienzo de Tlaxcala. The Mesolore Project, Brown University.

<http://www.mesolore.org/viewer/view/3/The-Lienzo-de-Tlaxcala#>

<sup>8</sup> Matthew Restall and Florine, Florine Asselbergs. (2007). *Invading Guatemala*. “Maya Sources.”

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Restall and Florine, Florine Asselbergs. (2007). *Invading Guatemala*. “Maya Sources.”

Alvarado's second letter details the siege against the Tz'utujil. He describes that once he arrived at Iximche (the capital of the Kaqchikel), he received everything he needed. Alvarado describes that seven leagues from there, there was a city on a lake (referring to Atitlan) who had made war against the Kaqchikel. He writes about the order he sent to the Tz'utujil to go with him, and if they did not, he would unleash a war against them. According to Alvarado, the Tz'utujils killed the messenger, so Alvarado and the Kaqchikels went and attacked the Tz'utujil. The letter describes the battles that occurred at Lake Atitlan and the submission of the Tz'utujil. After submitting to the Iberians, the Tz'utujil and the Kaqchikels joined the Iberians on the campaigns against the Pipil and other indigenous groups near Cuzcatlan. In the letter, Alvarado mentions that "five or six thousand of our Indian allies" joined forces and were present in the conquest of El Salvador.<sup>10</sup>

To discuss the Maya presence in further conquest, Restall and Asselbergs utilize primary documents from a Maya group, including annals that narrate the history of the Kaqchikel and neighboring states.<sup>11</sup> An excerpt in the Annals describes the campaigns of both Pedro and Jorge de Alvarado and starts by narrating when the Iberians reached Xe Tulul and the Ki'ches died.<sup>12</sup> The Iberians then moved to Xelajub, which is also depicted in the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* (Figure 4)

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<sup>10</sup> Restall, M. and Asselbergs, F. (2007). *Invading Guatemala*. "Spanish sources" University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

<sup>11</sup> Restall, M. and Asselbergs, F. (2007). *Invading Guatemala*. "Spanish sources" University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew Restall and Florine, Florine Asselbergs. (2007). *Invading Guatemala*. "Maya Sources." University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

with the only exception that in the *lienzo*, Xelajub is referred to by the Nahua name, *Quetzaltenaco*.



Figure 4 Nahua forces battling Ki'che warriors, Cell 77 of the Lienzo de Tlaxcala. The Mesolore Project, Brown University <http://www.mesolore.org/viewer/view/3/The-Lienzo-de-Tlaxcala#>

In Xelajub the Ki'che people were dissolved and killed. The annals state that as Alvarado continued to hunt the Ki'ches, he asked the Kaqchikel for warriors to kill the Ki'ches, and “400 warriors went to kill the Ki'ches.”<sup>13</sup> However, the alliance did not last long and ended when the Kaqchikels rebelled against the Iberians. The annals narrate the rebellion by detailing that a

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Restall and Florine Asselbergs. (2007). *Invading Guatemala*. “Maya Sources.” University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

“Demon-warrior” told them to leave the city because he was going to kill the Iberians.<sup>14</sup> The Kaqchikel fled the city, and Alvarado declared war against them. The main reason why the Kaqchikel rebelled was due to the heavy tribute placed on them. A Nahua group from Quauquechollan, modern-day Puebla, also narrated the campaigns the Iberians led to conquer Guatemala and how they aided the Iberians in the conquest of the region.

The Quauquecholteca were a Nahua group who resided in San Martin Quauquechollan, Puebla. The Quauquecholteca painted the *Lienzo de Quauquechollan* depicting the campaigns led by Jorge de Alvarado during 1527-1529 in the re-conquest of Guatemala. The *lienzo* intended to serve two different functions; it was created to inform the crown about their services, and as such fits the “genre” of *probanzas*, which highlight the accomplishments of conquistadors in hopes of favors in return. Both groups, Nahuas and Spaniards, wrote *probanzas*. In the case of the Iberians, Alvarado wrote *probanzas* highlighting his accomplishments in the conquests during 1527-1529. The *Lienzo de Quauquechollan* also serves as the first map of Guatemala and proves that the Guatemalan conquest was as much of a native conquest as it was a Spanish conquest.<sup>15</sup> Figure 5 depicts a battle that pitted Quauquecholteca conquistadors battling Kaqchikel warriors.

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew Restall and Florine Asselbergs. (2007). *Invading Guatemala*. “Maya Sources.” University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

<sup>15</sup> “Lienzo De Quauquechollan.” Quauquechollan: A Chronicle of Conquest, Universidad Francisco Marroquin..  
<https://lienzo.ufm.edu/vea-lienzo/vea-el-lienzo/>



Figure 5 Quauhquecholteca forces battling maya groups during the re-conquest of Guatemala, upper right corner from the Lienzo de Quauhquechollan. Universidad Francisco Marroquin. <https://lienzo.ufm.edu/vea-lienzo/vea-el-lienzo/>

The image depicts Nahua conquistadors wielding Spanish weapons symbolizing the Nahua-Spanish alliance. The image quickly distinguishes the difference between the Nahuas and the native Maya groups. The Quauhquecholteca are depicted wearing headgear, and wielding spears, shields, and axes. They are wielding the same weapons as the Spaniards and present themselves as conquistadors. The image selected from the *lienzo* solely focuses on the Quauhquecholteca warriors and depicts the presence of only one Iberian in the battle. The book, *Invading Guatemala*, describes that at times, the Nahua warriors would take on campaigns by themselves without any Iberians at all. Figure 5 shows the importance of the Nahua group in combat, for they are shown front and center in the battle. The *lienzo* presents the idea that the second

conquest of Guatemala was a Nahua conquest. The Quauhquecholteca, when painting the lienzo, made it clear that both the Spaniards and them were equal, and presented themselves as principal conquistadors in the conquest.

Like his brother, Jorge, Pedro de Alvarado wrote letters narrating the conquest of Guatemala. However, his letters were less widespread. The book *Conquered Conquistador* by Asselbergs helped to publish the letters in 2004, and for the first time, the letters were translated to English in the book, *Invading Guatemala* in 2007. The book describes that Jorge de Alvarado relied even more on Nahua groups than his brother. The book challenges the history of who is the true conquistador of Guatemala. Asselbergs challenges notion that the Alvarado brothers were responsible for the conquest of Guatemala instead gives the spotlight to indigenous people. According to the book, between 5000 to 6000, indigenous allies from central Mexica departed with Alvarado in the second conquest of Guatemala.<sup>16</sup> Part of the army was composed of Quauhquecholteca warriors, in 1529, the conquest of Guatemala was finally solidified.

Both the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* and the *Lienzo de Quauhquechollan* share many similarities and differences as they narrate the conquest expeditions in Guatemala, starting with the expedition of 1524 and the letter campaigns from 1527-1529. For example, both *lienzos* start by highlighting the alliance created and omit any conflicts they may have faced before becoming allies with the Spanish. Both groups also painted the *lienzos* decades post-conquest.

The *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, in particular, starts by depicting the alliance between them and the

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<sup>16</sup> Florine G. L. Asselbergs 2008. *Conquered Conquistadors: The Lienzo de Quauhquechollan : a Nahua Vision of the Conquest of Guatemala*. New ed., illustrated ed. Boulder, Colo.: University Press of Colorado

Iberians but ignored the two weeks of conflicts and battles before the alliance was established. The *Lienzo de Quauquechollan* does the same thing. It ignores the campaign the Iberians undertook with the help of the Tlaxcalans to conquer Quauquechollan. Both *lienzos* solely focus on the alliance established. Both *lienzos* heavily highlight the aid provided during expedition campaigns through Mesoamerica. They emphasize combat roles they played and present themselves as the main conquistadors. Both *lienzos* also highlight the noncombat roles that native people performed, such as carriers, merchants and spies. One difference in the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* is that the *lienzo* ignores the aid the Kaqchikels provided in the first campaigns throughout Guatemala, in particular in the campaigns to Quetzaltenango, when the Annals of the Kaqchikels narrate that 400 Mayan warriors accompanied the Iberians to kill the Ki'ches. Documents from the Tz'utujil provide further insight into the disillusionment most Indian conquistadors faced in the post conquest years. For example, documents from the ruler of the Tz'utujil shows his people's grievances and how after the conquest, although they provided services for further conquest expeditions, the Iberians placed a hefty tax on them. Unlike both *lienzos* and Annals of the Kaqchikel, which focus on the war, the Tz'utujil focused on the devastating effect of Spanish demands on the local population and economy under Spanish colonial rule.

This paper seeks to highlight the contributions of Maya and Nahua groups in the conquest of Guatemala and how vital alliances were in both of the Alvarado brothers' campaigns. As Guatemalan, this side of history really caught my attention, because many Guatemalans still learn the conquest history through a Eurocentric lens and are unaware of native contributions. But maybe the tide is slowly turning. The Guatemalan newspaper *Prensa Libre* posted an article

in 2016 titled “*Los quauhquecholtecas también fueron conquistadores.*” The Quauhquecholtecas were also conquistadors.<sup>17</sup> The article seeks to inform the people of Guatemala of the contributions of indigenous people in the conquest. It also seeks to shift the narrative away from a Eurocentric perspective. The article seeks to disprove the Myth of the Iberians’ self-proclaimed superiority by utilizing the research of Asselbergs and Oudijk to prove that without the aid of native people, the conquest would likely have played out differently. This paper seeks to further contribute towards disproving the myth of an all-European conquest and distinguish the contributions of indigenous conquistadors in the Mesoamerican conquest history.

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<sup>17</sup> Jose Luis Escobar. 2016. "Los Quauhquecholtecas También Fueron Conquistadores". *Prensa Libre*. <https://www.prensalibre.com/revista-d/los-quauhquecholtecas-tambien-fueron-conquistadores/>.

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