

Malintzin: The Buried Voice of the Spanish Conquest

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The Mexican Conquest is one of the most significant events in world history. However, for centuries, the dominant narrative has been a Eurocentric portrayal that presumes Hernán Cortés and other conquistadors to be heroic, noble, and competent to maneuver through México with little to no opposition. Additionally, it silences Indigenous voices of the 1519 Spanish Conquest and omits the acknowledgment of Indigenous contributions to Spanish success. Matthew Restall's *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest* pushes against the dominant Eurocentric narrative of the Conquest.<sup>1</sup> In particular, Restall brings an Indigenous woman, Malintzin, the interpreter of Hernán Cortés, to the forefront. With support from translated Nahuatl texts and pictographs and sixteenth-century Spanish sources, Malintzin's voice becomes visible. Two core Indigenous sources that molded Restall's arguments are the *Florentine Codex*, a Mexica source created a generation post-Conquest, and the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, representing an Indigenous ally perspective.<sup>2</sup> Through these sources, Malintzin emerges as a central figure with a multi-skill set of quick language acquisition, the ability to navigate high-risk scenarios, interpreting with cultural mediation and sensitivity, and the utilization of different linguistic registers. Her skills allowed her to make a conscious decision to become Cortés' interpreter and proved to be indispensable when it came to Spanish-Indigenous communication during the Conquest.

During the Conquest, Malintzin's significance first became apparent with her quick language acquisition. Malintzin was born to a noble family of Coatzacoalcos, a southern region of Veracruz, México. Pilar Godayol mentions in her article "Malintzin/La Malinche/Doña Marina: Re-Reading the Myth of a Treacherous Translator" that Malintzin's birthplace is in Nahuatl speaking territory attributing to her ability to speak Nahuatl.<sup>3</sup> Godayol's analysis of Malintzin also focuses on the Franciscan friar Diego de Landa's account, *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán*, to

address Malintzin's presence in Yucatán. De Landa reported that Malintzin had been kidnapped from her birthplace and sold in Xicalango and Champotón.<sup>4</sup> It was there that in addition to Nahuatl, Malintzin picked up Mayan language, making her a bilingual speaker and able to communicate with Gerónimo de Aguilar, a Spanish conquistador who had been shipwrecked and enslaved among the Mayans and became the Spanish to Mayan language interpreter to Cortés.

Malintzin appropriated her bilingual abilities to her advantage during the Conquest's move inland, away from the Mayan speaking Yucatán into Nahuatl speaking central México. Frances Karttunen notes in "Rethinking Malinche," that Cortés observed Malintzin speaking to the Nahuatl speaking groups the Spanish encountered.<sup>5</sup> Malintzin's interactions not only illustrated her ability to speak Mayan with Aguilar but also confirmed that she spoke Nahuatl. Competency in two languages freed Malintzin from remaining a concubine, and a slave *para hacer tortillas* (to make tortillas), and instead allowed her to become the most reliable interpreter to Cortés.<sup>6</sup>

The growth of Malintzin's ability to quickly pick up language is depicted further in communicative exchanges between Cortés and the Mexica *tlatoani* (lord) Moteucōma. The *Florentine Codex*, a Mexica account of the arrival of Cortés and the 1521 fall of Tenochtitlán, records in Book XII, Chapter Seventeen, and the conversation around the Spanish attempt to detain the powerful Mexica *tlatoani* Moteucōma. In Figure 1, the *codex* artists illustrated Malintzin in the center between Cortés and Moteucōma, ascribing to her a position of an intermediary. The squiggle-like markers shown between the Spanish and Indigenous parties are used by Mesoamerican codex writers to denote that a conversation is occurring.<sup>7</sup> Facilitation in this instance would only be possible if Spanish and Nahuatl were the languages spoken. According to

the Nahuatl text in Book XII, Chapter Eighteen of the *Codex*, Malintzin can be observed using the language of Castile (Spanish).<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 1:** Malintzin translating between Spanish and Moteuczoma. Folio 26 in Book XII of the *Florentine Codex*. Digital image provided by the World Digital Library.

Camilla Townsend, a historian and author of *Malintzin's Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico*, brought to light Malintzin's linguistic contributions to the Conquest and specifically highlighted her ability to learn Spanish with the help of her fellow interpreter Gerónimo de Aguilar.<sup>9</sup> Malintzin's aptitude to quickly learn Spanish became essential to the Conquest as Cortés relieved Aguilar of his interpreting services when he observed him struggling

to understand conversations in Nahuatl. With the dismissal of Aguilar, Cortés positioned Malintzin as the primary agent who handled all interactions spoken in Mayan, Nahuatl, and Spanish.<sup>10</sup>

The *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* further verifies Malintzin's quick acquisition of language. The *Lienzo*, a tapestry commissioned by the *cabildo* (town council) of Tlaxcala, one of the Spaniards' most important Indigenous allies, offers a pictorial account of the Spanish Conquest that starts with the arrival of Cortés at Tlaxcala through the fall of Tenochtitlán and then continues with campaigns across Mesoamerica. The *Lienzo* frequently presents Malintzin in the middle of both Spanish and Indigenous parties interpreting. However, not one image of the tapestry shows Aguilar translating. Aguilar's absence in the *Lienzo* cements Malintzin as the only interpreter for communication across Nahuatl, Mayan, and Spanish languages, naturally placing a heavy dependency on her by Cortés. Despite the pressure, her trilingual proficiency proved successful as Cortés detained and isolated the Nahua tlatoani, and began to exercise his control in México-Tenochtitlán. Even beyond Tenochtitlán, Malintzin continued as Cortés' interpreter, making more of her linguistic proficiencies visible during encounters with other Indigenous *altepete* (Indigenous communities).

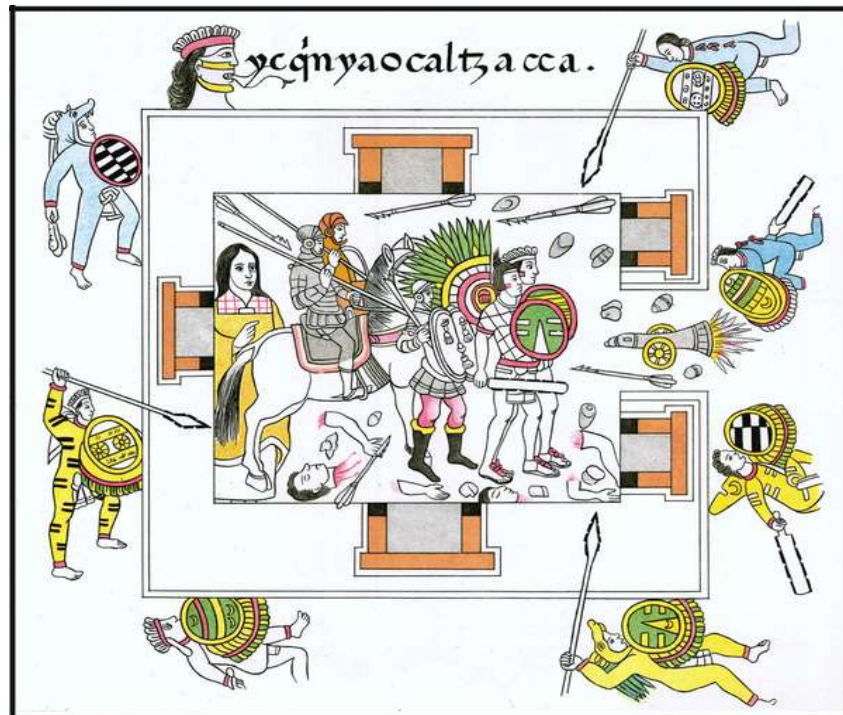
Another linguistic skill that Malintzin utilized was her capacity to interpret during high-risk scenarios. Throughout the Conquest, especially with the omission of Aguilar, Malintzin became the intermediary in peace negotiations and other Spanish-Indigenous communicative exchanges. With differences in culture, language, and the political nature of Indigenous alliances, the lack of understanding by Cortés undoubtedly placed his interpreter at the forefront of the interactions with unpredictable outcomes. One high-risk interaction Malintzin found herself in was the negotiation between the Spaniards and Tlaxcalans, a rival *altepetl* of Mexica-Tenochtitlán.

Although, both the Spanish and Tlaxcalans had a distaste for the Mexica, the Spanish attempted to exert their control over the Mexica enemies, which erupted in a month-long bloodshed. Though battles eventually yielded, hostilities still ran high with the Tlaxcalans planning ambushes, and Cortés threatening to use violence if the tlatoani did not come to negotiate peace.<sup>11</sup> Townsend mentioned Cortes' letter to the crown, "I took all fifty [messengers] and cut off their hands and sent them to tell their chief that by day or by night, or whenever they chose to come, they would see who we were".<sup>12</sup> Despite the danger that came from Cortés' demands, Malintzin continued mediating Spanish-Tlaxcalan negotiations. Her effectiveness was significant as she ushered in the Spanish-Tlaxcalan alliance.

Malintzin's presence during the negotiations with the Tlaxcalans is further encapsulated in the memoirs of Bernal Díaz, a Spanish Conquistador under Cortés.<sup>13</sup> Díaz described that after the bloodshed ceased, Tlaxcalan *caciques* (local native leaders) would meet with Cortés, referring to him as Malinche.<sup>14</sup> Book XII of the *Florentine Codex* also attests to Indigenous groups' references to Cortés as Malinche, symbolizing visibility to Malintzin's voice as her name transposed on to Cortés since she spoke on his behalf. The Indigenous reference placed upon Cortés meant the caciques of Tlaxcala equated Malintzin's interpreting with being worthy of much importance and respect.

Cell 14 (Figure 2) from the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* exemplifies another dangerous scenario and an expectation of Malintzin to interpret. Figure 2 depicts Malintzin in the middle of an enclosed area surrounded by warriors identified as not being from Tlaxcala. Wartime dress, shields, obsidian-swords, and bladed weapons established the difference between the two Indigenous groups.<sup>15</sup> The physical danger is evident as Malintzin is positioned further back in the building and

shielded by Spanish-Tlaxcalan forces who protected her from the opposing warriors. However, despite the conditions, Malintzin presence proves that there is a Spanish need for her regardless of the possible violence afflicted towards her.



**Figure 2:** Tlaxcala-Spanish allies fighting side by side, surrounded by Mexica warriors. Malintzin illustrated behind the Spanish and Tlaxcala warriors. Cell 14 of the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*. Digital image provided by the Mesolore Project, Brown University.

Malintzin also displayed another linguistic strength, interpreting with cultural awareness and sensitivity. According to the map provided in Frances Karttunen’s “Rethinking Malinche,” the land conquered by the Spanish and their allies during the Conquest stretched from Veracruz to Tenochtitlán.<sup>16</sup> The Spanish inevitably faced with Nahua and Mayan cultural practices, as well as a variety of local dialects. In her youth, Malintzin had to navigate between different Indigenous cultures, and she learned to do the same with the Spanish culture. Townsend stated that, “She had



an extraordinary gift to assess situations.”<sup>17</sup> Malintzin’s gift proved invaluable due to the fact that the Spanish would not know whom they would be facing during the conquest.

As discussed previously, the peace treaty between the Spanish and the warring altepetl of Tlaxcala exemplified Malintzin’s capacity to interpret with cultural mediation and sensitivity. When the Tlaxcalans were ready to make peace with the Spanish, Malintzin was the mediator of the negotiations. However, Malintzin not only had to translate Cortés’ words in Spanish to one tlatoani, but Tlaxcala’s four *tlatoque* (plural for tlatoani), all of whom were involved in the negotiations. The talks of peace represented an extremely complicated mediation and a delicate Indigenous political arrangement with five individuals speaking at one time. Malintzin’s experience with both cultures allowed her to be the only individual culturally and linguistically prepared for this encounter. Díaz further attested to her uniqueness in his memoirs proclaiming, “Without her, we couldn’t do anything.”<sup>18</sup>

Malintzin’s cultural awareness is again evident when interpreting during Cortés’ encounter with Moteucçoma. From a Mexica perspective, without Malintzin, interaction with Moteucçoma was impossible for Cortés. Karttunen mentioned that any subjects in Moteucçoma’s presence would never let their eyes come up from the ground.<sup>19</sup> Malintzin maintained communication between Cortés and Moteucçoma without having to keep her eyes on the ground, informing him that Spanish forces were about to arrest him. Although a detrimental situation for the Mexica tlatoani, this example depicts Malintzin’s strength to maneuver through Indigenous cultural practices while meeting the Spanish objective of capturing Moteucçoma.<sup>20</sup>

A final component of Malintzin’s linguistic efficiency, and perhaps her most significant asset overall, was her ability to switch between informal and formal registers of Nahuatl.



Karttunen, author of “To the Valley of Mexico: Doña Marina, “La Malinche” notes that Malintzin, as a noble woman, obtained the ability to understand a linguistic register known as *tēcpillahtōlli* (lordly speech).<sup>21</sup> The *Tēcpillahtōlli* register could only be obtained by Nahua nobles through education. The Nahua *mācēhualtin* (commoners) did not have access to education and therefore did not possess the ability to understand or utilize the grammatical complexity of the register.<sup>22</sup> Malintzin’s ability to utilize a noble register traces back to her father, a noble of Coatzacoalcos, related directly to a tlatoani or through the lineage of a tlatoani.

The Spanish months-long stay in Tenochtitlán confirmed Malintzin’s capacity to use *tēcpillahtōlli*. Figure 4 illustrates a moment after the capture of Moteucçoma with Malintzin, interpreting between Cortés and a Nahua noble who is identified by the slicked-back knot of hair at the top of his head.



**Figure 4:** Malintzin translating between Cortés and a Mexican *pilli* (noble). Folio 29 in Book XII of the *Florentine Codex*. Digital image provided by the World Digital Library.

Cortés relied on Malintzin to give to Moteucçoma's noble class, which is depicted by the finger-pointing signifying the power and authority of "he who speaks". This frank exchange was essential for Cortés because without Malintzin's knowledge of the lordly register communication with the Tenochca *piles* (nobility) would not have been possible.

Malintzin's voice is one that finds itself being drowned out by a dominant narrative of the Spanish Conquest that presumes a Eurocentric view of successes. With the use of two core Indigenous sources, The *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* and the *Florentine Codex*, we see that her presence was indeed, significant. Sixteenth-century Spanish memoirs like that of Bernal Díaz de Castillo further attest to the value of Malintzin's linguistic skills, making it hard to deny the importance of her quick language acquisition, ability to navigate high-risk scenarios, interpreting with cultural

mediation and sensitivity, and the utilization of different linguistic registers in Spanish-Indigenous communication. Undoubtedly, her contributions were an attributing factor to Spanish successes. Perhaps more importantly, they were an asset of her agency and the ability of an Indigenous woman to shape all of the most significant events in world history.

- <sup>1</sup> Matthew Restall, *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquests* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford, University Press, 2003).
- <sup>2</sup> For the *Florentine Codex*, see James Lockhart, ed., *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). For the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, see “Lienzo de Tlaxcala” at the Mesolore Project by Brown University, <<http://www.mesolore.org/viewer/view/3/The-Lienzo-de-Tlaxcala>>
- <sup>3</sup> Pilar Godayol, “Malintzin/La Malinche/Doña Marina: Re-Reading the Myth of the Treacherous Translator,” *Journal of Iberian & Latin American Studies* 18, no. 1 (2012): .doi:10.1080/14701847.2012.716645.
- <sup>4</sup> Godayol, “Malintzin/La Malinche/Doña Marina,” 63.
- <sup>5</sup> Frances E. Karttunen, “Rethinking Malinche,” In *Indian Women of Early Mexico*, 290-312. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994.
- <sup>6</sup> Karttunen, “Rethinking Malinche,” 302.
- <sup>7</sup> Doris Namala, “Mesoamerican Perspectives on Mexican Conquest History: Using Digitized Indigenous Primary Sources in the Undergraduate Classroom,” *The History Teacher* 52, no. 2 (2019): 258.
- <sup>8</sup> James Lockhart, ed., *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).
- <sup>9</sup> Camilla Townsend. *Malintzin's Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico*. (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2006).
- <sup>10</sup> Karttunen, “Rethinking Malinche,” 301.
- <sup>11</sup> Karttunen, “Valley of Mexico,” 7.
- <sup>12</sup> Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices*, 61.
- <sup>13</sup> Bernal Díaz de Castillo. *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la nueva España (The True History of the Conquest of New Spain)* at the Internet Archive, <<https://archive.org/details/memoirsofconquis01dauoft>>.
- <sup>14</sup> Díaz de Castillo, *Historia verdadera*, 176.
- <sup>15</sup> *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, Meslore Project, <<http://www.mesolore.org/viewer/view/3/The-Lienzo-de-Tlaxcala>>
- <sup>16</sup> Karttunen, “Rethinking Malinche,” 190.
- <sup>17</sup> Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices*, 158.
- <sup>18</sup> Townsend, *Malintzin's Choices*, 107.
- <sup>19</sup> Karttunen, “Rethinking Malinche,” 305.
- <sup>20</sup> Díaz de Castillo, *Historia verdadera*, 280.
- <sup>21</sup> Karttunen, “Valley of Mexico,” 11.
- <sup>22</sup> Karttunen, “Rethinking Malinche,” 301.

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