

Fork in the Road: La Malinche's Role in the Conquest of Mexico

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Abstract

The topic of La Malinche is a delicate one not only because of the extraordinary lack of historical data about her, but also because of the extreme social reactions to whatever parts of her story we have. Malinche is either loved or hated in such extremes that her story is rarely touched upon by neutral forces. As fascinating as these studies of Malinche's influence are, there is not enough evidence for a true personal profile of Malinche. There is however enough evidence from the writings of the participating Spaniards and natives to assess how much influence Malinche had in the conquest of Mexico. By comparing different texts, the argument can be made that Malinche was within a position of importance amongst the Spaniards, and grew only stronger after her decision to deliver intelligence that would lead to the massacre at Cholula.

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The topic of La Malinche is a delicate one not only because of the extraordinary lack of historical data about her, but also because of the extreme social reactions to whatever parts of her story we have. Malinche is either loved or hated in such extremes that her story is rarely touched upon by neutral forces. As fascinating as these studies of Malinche's influence are, what is overlooked is the effort to fill in the pieces of the puzzle of the actual events of her life. There is not enough evidence for a true personal profile of Malinche, but there exists enough evidence from the writings of the participating Spaniards and natives to assess how much influence Malinche had in the conquest of Mexico. By comparing different texts written within the time of the conquest along with analytical academic texts, the argument can be made that Malinche was within a position of importance amongst the Spaniards, and grew only stronger after her decision to deliver intelligence that would lead to the massacre at Cholula.

Ironically enough, Malinche's indigenous birth name is believed to be Malinalli, the name of a daysign in the Aztec calendar representing perseverance against all odds and creation of alliances that will survive the test of time ("Daysign Malinalli"). Malinalli was baptized *Doña Marina* by the Spanish, but the *r* sound did not exist in her world, so she called herself "Malina" (Townsend 36). *Malintzin* became her name among the Mexican allies who respected her as much as her cohorts, and showed it by adding the honorific title *-tzin* to the end of her mispronounced baptismal name. It is from the Spanish mispronunciation of her honored name that gave birth to the most common term "Malinche" (Townsend 55). For the purposes of this essay, this core member of the Spanish conquest of Mexico will be referred to by the Spanish conflated term for the honor and fear paid to her by the Indians. "Malinche" is neither Indian nor Spanish but three confused ideas about one identity. The idea of La Malinche represents her own conflict over cultural and sexual identification, and history's own confusion over many details of her life.

Without Malinche's guidance, the conquest of Mexico would have been doomed due to Hernán Cortés' history of improvisation. In the beginning, Governor Diego Velázquez of Cuba had stripped Cortés of his position as Captain of the conquest of Mexico. In the first and biggest act of spontaneity, Hernán Cortés disobeyed Governor Velázquez and sailed away for the Mesoamerican mainland on February 18, 1519, taking with him 11 vessels, 600 Spaniards, and chronicler of the conquest Bernal Díaz del Castillo. Having heard of the presence of "bearded men" (Gómara 28) in Yucatan, Cortés stopped there first and picked up Jerónimo de Aguilar, a Franciscan friar living amongst the Maya. This was someone who spoke Mayan and Spanish fluently, therefore someone Cortés needed. Once they reached Tabasco, the Spanish had their first intense match with the locals and succeeded. The Tabascan leaders gave Cortés a multitude of tribute, including beads, feathers, and twenty women, one of whom, was La Malinche herself. This was all achieved without one person who spoke Nahuatl, an achievement that left the Spaniards at a dead end after capturing Tabasco.

Malinche's whereabouts after birth could have ignited an internal motive: to escape her cycle of passage onto strange men and gain control over her destiny. Díaz del Castillo and Cortés' biographer/secretary Francisco López de Gómara reported that she was traded to Xicalanco after birth. Cortés' letters to King Charles V, Castillo, Gómara, and the *Codex Florentino* all reported

that she was traded again, then again given as a gift to the Spaniards by the people of the coast of Tabasco. Díaz del Castillo's account of these events is particularly romantic, suggesting either an epic truth, or an idealistically mistranslated story. He compares Malinche to Joseph of Egypt:

[Donna Maria]... was the daughter of the chief or Prince of Painala. He dying while this lady was an infant, his widow married another chief... They therefore gave this girl to certain Indians of Xicalango to carry off secretly, and caused it to be rumored that she was dead... Xicalango gave her to those of Tabasco, and the latter to Cortés... (Castillo 52-53).

What makes her trade to the Spaniards so special and what cements her alliance to her new masters? Up to this point, everything from Aguilar's acquisition to the capture of Tabasco happened while Jerónimo de Aguilar did not understand or speak Nahuatl. Gómara reports Cortés' astonishment to find Malinche speaking fluent Mayan to the Tabascans: "So Cortés took her aside with de Aguilar and promised her more than her liberty if she would establish friendship between him and the men of her country" (Gómara 56). Suddenly she was the key to the continuation of the conquest.

Malinche became a woman of opportunity who, while Cortés sought information from her about the neighboring Aztecs, was gathering information from Cortés and other Spaniards about the Spanish culture. She was determined to make sure Cortés was more than obligated to keep his promise of "liberty" to her while learning about what she could do herself to make it happen otherwise. After she and the other nineteen Tabascan women were baptized and given to the Spaniards, the newly named Doña Marina was taught about the Catholic religion as well Spanish culture. She most likely overheard how a Spanish noblewoman had significantly more privileges compared to a woman from Tenochtitlan (Haskett, Schroeder, Wood 18-19). But she was probably wary that if she made herself only borderline valuable, she could still be seen as dispensable. Even before their next arrival in Tlaxcala, she took steps ahead, gathering intelligence from the surrounding Indians and reporting her findings to Cortés. She also recruited soldiers and gathered supplies while Cortés was away:

La Malinche called the nobles together. She climbed up to the palace roof and cried: 'Mexicanos, come forward! The Spaniards need your help! Bring them food and pure water.' (León-Portilla 69).

Malinche's loyalty was tested in the events before the massacre at Cholula when the local citizens offered her protection. When two Mexicans, an ambassador and a priest, encouraged Cortés to carry on to Cholula, the captain happened to notice that Cholula's women and children were being sent away. He began to suspect that the Cholulans were planning a massive ambush (Cortés 73). The only person to know for sure was Malinche. The night before the massacre, Malinche was privately approached by the wife of a cacique who offered her mercy and protection: "She invited [Malinche] to her own house, as a place of security from the danger which was ready to overwhelm us, making at the same time a proposal to her, to accept as a husband, her son"

(Castillo 121). After the proposal:

Donna Maria, with a profusion of thanks... agreed to all that she proposed, but said that she wanted someone with whom to trust her effects. She then obtained information of every particular of the business, all which the old woman informed her she had learned from her husband, who was chief of one of the divisions of the city... (Castillo 121).

It is rather peculiar that she does not expose the plot right away; but she follows the same tactics as Cortés, gathering as much information as possible, mulling over each and every outcome before making a move. On the one hand, with the Spaniards, she is promised liberty and has more knowledge about the gain of property, wealth, and status in Spanish society (Socolow 9-10). On the other hand, Aztec society is one that she already knows too well, where even her status as the daughter of a prince couldn't save her from the slave trade. From this woman she gathered that the Cholulans were planning on capturing twenty of the prisoners for sacrifice (Castillo 120). Malinche had every reason to believe that she, the "traitor" of her people, would make an excellent sacrifice. Malinche convinced the woman to stay put and take care of her effects, as if she was leaving with them, only leaving to pass on her words to Cortés (Castillo 121).

So far, Malinche had been the sole reason for the continuation of the conquest after Tabasco and partially the reason for Cortés' success with the Mexicans. At this point in the conquest, she would be the reason for the Spanish success through the bloodiest battle thus far. Two priests Cortés interrogated said that Aztec King Motecuhzoma had 10,000 troops set up in Cholula and 10,000 troops hidden, all waiting for their arrival. When the Spanish and their Tlaxcalan and Cempoalan troops arrived in the city, they attacked the Cholulans immediately and without warning (León-Portilla 40). After the initial fight, Cortés had some Cholulan captains put to death, while the rest were bound. Temples were burned, as well as many live Mexicans, and idols were destroyed. At the five-hour mark, Cholula surrendered (Gómara 129). Cortés began his usual procedure, successfully convincing the surviving Cholulans to fight on their side for the sole purpose of defeating their oppressor, King Motecuhzoma in the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan. While Cortés and his strongest loyalists gave little credit to Malinche for her reconnaissance, Bernal Díaz del Castillo's writings as well as Aztec plates/inscriptions portray the true nature of Malinche's influence. Castillo is keen to point out that Malinche was not just repeating Cortés' words in Nahuatl, but she was adding Cortés' emotions, and if necessary, her own. From his writing, we can safely gather that Malinche was on the same level of power and deserves the same amount of credit as Cortés and Jerónimo de Aguilar. In the artwork of the Aztecs, Malinche occupies the same horizontal or vertical plane as Cortés, suggesting equality. She also points in the direction Cortés and his men are following, suggesting the natives recognized her significant role as the all-around guide, possibly sub-leader of the conquest (Townsend 71, 75; León-Portilla 42). It is beneficial for this argument to point out that after the natives gave Malinche her honored title, "Malintzin", Cortés and other Spaniards were also directly addressed as "Malintzin" (Townsend 56). For the Indians, everyone in Malinche's group took on meaning in relation to her, their spokeswoman.

For Malinche's entire life, she existed as a woman in a man's world, where the only way to

escape ownership was to come as an indispensable asset in the strangers' mission. But why did she go out of her way to share information from the natives with Cortés rather than break free and return to Cholula with the old woman to marry her son? On the one hand, we can assume that the old woman may not have taken so much interest in Malinche, but more interest in separating Cortés from his key to native intelligence. If so, then there would not have been a need to tell Malinche of the ambush in the first place. Even if the woman was sincere, the proposal would mean only one thing to Malinche; for at least the third or fourth time, she would be passed on to another man. Malinche most likely had no interest in male relations unless it yielded property, wealth, or status. With all her strategy, Malinche ensured her controversial title as one of the most important influences in the conquest of Mexico.

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