

Malintzin: A Shifting Figure

By Sonia Vazquez

Personal Reflection

I was born in Mexico and while growing up, I always heard the story of this woman who had betrayed the Mexicans during the conquest; the story of the woman responsible for Spanish domination. Then, some years ago I heard this 'other' story about the difficulties of her life and her overall loyalty to her master. I was confused on how a so 'loyal' person can be perceived as a traitor in the history of Mexico. Understanding she was a product of the circumstances is crucial to understand she had no intention of betraying her countrymen.

I think she is significant because she is the only 'famous' woman in the history of Mexico in more than three hundred years. There is no way a person can transcend so fiercely into history and not be "significant." The term 'malinchismo' is widely used in the Mexican vocabulary and its negative meaning is exasperating now that I know she was the first native who believed in the unification of the Mexican tribes to finish an era of corruption and oppression.

Biography

When Columbus 'discovered' the Americas, the indigenous people were condemned to lose their heritage and values to the new culture coming from Europe; current societies are the result from the mixture of the Spanish soldiers and the native women. Records from the early 1500's to the late 1700's show almost no presence of significant characters emerging entirely from the indigenous culture. One of the exceptions is Malintzin. The noble who was converted a slave, the slave who grew to be a translator, the translator who gained the respect of two cultures. History has not been fair to her. For many in the Latin culture, La Malinche is the Mexican Eve, a symbol of national betrayal; for a minority, Malintzin is regarded as the first mother of the Mexican nation,¹ a symbol representing "the Indian women who were fascinated, violated, and seduced by the Spaniards."² However something is completely undisputable; Malintzin was the "only important woman during the conquest of Mexico"³ There is not going to be an agreement on whether Malintzin has to be viewed as a villainess or as a woman who was the product of the circumstances. The image of La Malinche changes accordingly to the elements "presented to the reader, the name by which she is [referred], what characteristics of personality and motivating psychological factors are attributed to her, [and] the activities assigned to her."⁴ La Malinche or Malintzin; a traitor or a founder.

In 1505, the lord of the mexicatl region of Paynala had his first child and named her Malinalli⁵, following the tradition of naming the child after the day they were born; malinalli is one of the twenty days of the mexicatl month.⁶ The settlement of Paynala was established in the bottom of the Yucatan peninsula having a constant interaction with the Mayan civilization.⁷ Even though the information is scarce, there is an acceptance that Malinalli was born noble which explains her ability in languages

¹ Cypess, Sandra Messinger. *La Malinche in Mexican Literature: From History to Myth*. University of Texas, Austin. 1991 p.2

² *Ibid.*, 95-96

³ *Ibid.*, 2

⁴ Cypess, Sandra Messinger. *La Malinche in Mexican Literature: From History to Myth*. University of Texas, Austin. 1991 p. 4-5

⁵ Adams, Jerome. *Liberators and Patriots of Latin America: Biographies of 23 Leaders*. McFarland & Co. 1991, p.2

⁶ Candelaria, Cordelia. "La Malinche, Feminist Prototype." *Chicana Leadership*. Ed. Flores Niemann et al. Frontiers Publishing. 2002, p. 3

⁷ Diaz, Bernal. *The Conquest of New Spain*. Translator: J.M. Cohen. London: Penguin Books, 1963, p. 85

and in taking significant decisions in the never-ending activities Cortes gave her; she was an educated Nahuatl that emerged to be a talented interpreter, an intelligent officer, advisor, and negotiator. *Malinalli as a noble*: A theory that explains how a noble Nahuatl ended as a slave on the Mayan city of Centla postulates that Malinalli was given to the Mayans as a gift for winning a battle between the Nahuatls of Xicalango and the Mayans of Tabasco. The Aztec Emperor, Ahuizotl, was always involved in wars and expansion; so at some point, he was unable to continue the Aztec support to the distant settlements and people had to fight for survival.⁸ In 1512, Malinalli's municipality, Xicalango, battled their Mayan neighbors in an attempt to continue their domination of the area;⁹ resulting in a terrible defeat of the Nahuatl settlement. Traditions of the period expected the overpowered group to give the most valuable and beautiful they had to the winners; this is how the cacique of Tabasco obtained Malinalli. She was suddenly separated from her family and thrown into slavery. Malinalli's beliefs were interpreted abruptly and went from honoring Nahuatl gods, to honoring new and unknown Mayan ones.¹⁰ This was the first, of two, violent mutilation of Malinalli's gods.

Malinalli as a slave: The life of Malinalli changed completely once she was in the house of the Cacique of Tabasco. Her day started before the sunrise and ended after sunset; while Malinalli served in this house, she learned the Mayan language and also learned to serve unconditionally. One day, while she was doing her daily chores, news arrived to Centla: white and bearded men had gotten to Mayan territory in floating houses. As the information passed through Tabasco, it also found the Aztec capital, Montezuma; the Mexicatl advisors foretold it was Quetzalcoatl coming back.¹¹ A year after, the natives were saying: *He cu tal... He cu tal le uinicé* – Here it comes, here it comes the white men.¹²

Malinalli transformed into Malinalli Tenépal and Doña Marina: Malinalli, as everybody else in Centla, observed the white men and ask herself if they were really gods as the Aztecs believed. On 1519 the expedition commanded by Cortes entered the coast of Centla; a battle was fought and more than eight hundred Tabasqueños died, the Spanish technology was superior.¹³ As the tradition asked, the crushed settlement of Tabasco gave to Cortes and his men gifts the cacique thought were valuable. One of these gifts included twenty slaves who would be committed to serve the Spaniards in their necessities; Malinalli was a member of this group.¹⁴ On March 16, 1519 Malinalli changed owners and, once again, her traditions were replaced for those of a stranger; the second mutilation had happened. The Spanish baptized Malinalli with the name of Marina because there was a phonetic connection between the two names.¹⁵ Cortes distributed the twenty slaves among his captains and gave Marina to Alonso Hernandez Puertocarrero, one of Cortes' favorites.

The expedition continued north-west on March 20 and the slaves were all embarked on one boat; for many, that was their first night of honey-moon with the Spaniards.¹⁶ At this point, Marina only knew how to obey the master, she knew nothing about free will and own criterion.¹⁷ After four days of sailing, Cortes' expedition arrived in San Juan de Ulua; shortly after, two ambassadors from Montezuma approached the white men and asked for the captain in a language nobody understood, not even the translator Aguilar. From the bunch of slaves one answered: 'that's the one you are looking for' and pointed to Cortes; in that moment, Marina gained a face, a personality which allowed her to be transformed into Doña Marina for the Spanish and Malinalli Tenépal for the natives.¹⁸ The term 'Doña'

⁸ Rutiaga Luis. *Grandes Mexicanos: Malitzin*. Mexico City, Grupo Editorial Tomo. April 2004, p. 15

⁹ *Ibid.*, 16

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 22

¹¹ Rutiaga Luis. *Grandes Mexicanos: Malitzin*. Mexico City, Grupo Editorial Tomo. April 2004, p. 27-29

¹² *Ibid.*, 29

¹³ West, Rebecca. *Survivors in Mexico*. McFarlin Special Collections, Univerisyt of Tulsa, 2003, p.116

¹⁴ Adams, Jerome. *Liberators and Patriots of Latin America: Biographies of 23 Leaders*. McFarland & Co. 1991, p.4

¹⁵ Rutiaga Luis. *Grandes Mexicanos: Malitzin*. Mexico City, Grupo Editorial Tomo. April 2004, p. 43-44

¹⁶ Rutiaga Luis. *Grandes Mexicanos: Malitzin*. Mexico City, Grupo Editorial Tomo. April 2004, p. 50

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 50

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 54

is placed before a person's Christian name as a mark of respect;¹⁹ and the word *tenépal* comes from the Nahuatl 'tene' which means sharpened, pointed the general idea behind Malinalli *Tenépal*, then, is that of a person who has word facility.²⁰

Then she was Malintzin: From the moment Malinalli acquire a personality in the boat, she became part of all the expeditions Cortes performed in the New World. Malinalli was completely assimilated into her new life; she was now owned by the Spanish and, accordingly to her slave formation, she now had to be loyal and helpful to her new masters.²¹ For this reason, it is unreasonable to say she betrayed her countryman; in her mind, she did what she was supposed to do: serve the master. Malinalli's unconditional loyalty to her master can be understood through her strong character and bravery while accompanying the Spaniards; the following paragraph was extracted from Jerome Adams when citing Bernal Diaz: "Doña Marina who, although a native woman, possessed such manly valor that, although she had heard every day how the Indians were going to kill us and eat our flesh with chili, and had seen us surrounded in the [some] battles, and knew that all of us were wounded and sick, yet never allowed us to see any sign of fear in her, only a courage passing that of a woman."²²

Marina was now the official interpreter of Cortes. Through Malinalli's mouth came out expressions about the Christian faith; through her mouth Cortes voiced his intention to punish the oppressors, to stop human sacrifices, and to stop robberies. Through her voice Cortes expressed the Spanish were allies and were there to make amends and to end tyrannies.²³ Jerome Adams explained it with this sentence: "Non-Aztecs communities, long dominated and humiliated, hated their Aztec oppressors, a hatred that Doña Marina was instrumental in fanning and directing against the Aztecs."²⁴

Representatives from all over the empire came to Cortes with the expectation that he was going to free them; the natives allied themselves to the white men in their march to Tenochtitlan with the certainty this act would give them independence.²⁵ Marina was the conductor of the deaf yearning of being free, she was part of the slaves, the victims, who do not know what freedom is but seek it blindly in order to feel alive.²⁶ For this reason, the indigenes renamed her to Malintzin; a combination of her Nahuatl name and the ending 'tzin' which means reverence, respect, and affection.²⁷

History made her La Malinche: Cortes made Malinalli a leader; she was named the head of the female army who marched to the side of Cortes.²⁸ She was so important in Cortes' life that he followed the natives in calling her Malintzin, this motivated the Nahuatl speakers to called him Malintzin-é; since the ending '-é' denotes possession and ownership.²⁹ Time tainted the sound of the language and transformed her into Malinchi and Cortes into Malinche; since time is an ally of the conqueror, Cortes' corrupt name disappeared and was attributed to Malintzin.³⁰ Cortes used Marina at Tenochtitlan to help him "perpetrate the final treachery, the theft of an empire;"³¹ she helped him by uniting thousands and thousands of natives who yearned the destruction of the Aztec Empire. When Montezuma and his empire collapsed, Cortes betrayed all of them (including Malintzin). The natives were betrayed by Cortes and endure three hundred years of domination; for safety reasons, Mexicans couldn't express their disgust for Cortes but still had the necessity of expelling the overwhelming feelings resulting from the Spanish betrayal. How can the natives express their repugnance without saying Cortes name? Oh,

¹⁹ Adams, Jerome. *Liberators and Patriots of Latin America: Biographies of 23 Leaders*. McFarland & Co. 1991, p.4

²⁰ Rutiaga Luis. *Grandes Mexicanos: Malitzin*. Mexico City, Grupo Editorial Tomo. April 2004, p. 37

²¹ *Ibid.*, 61

²² Adams, Jerome. *Liberators and Patriots of Latin America: Biographies of 23 Leaders*. McFarland & Co. 1991, p.8

²³ Rutiaga Luis. *Grandes Mexicanos: Malitzin*. Mexico City, Grupo Editorial Tomo. April 2004, p.70-71

²⁴ Adams, Jerome. *Liberators and Patriots of Latin America: Biographies of 23 Leaders*. McFarland & Co. 1991, p.2

²⁵ Rutiaga Luis. *Grandes Mexicanos: Malitzin*. Mexico City, Grupo Editorial Tomo. April 2004, p. 73

²⁶ Rutiaga Luis. *Grandes Mexicanos: Malitzin*. Mexico City, Grupo Editorial Tomo. April 2004, p. 87

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 97

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 111

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 97

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 97-98

³¹ Adams, Jerome. *Liberators and Patriots of Latin America: Biographies of 23 Leaders*. McFarland & Co. 1991, p.10

Malintzin-é, Malintzin-é. That was the point, the moment Mexicans linked their unwanted conditions to the woman by the side of Cortes. Yes, the woman who talked about freedom and lied to them.³²

There is no basis for saying she was a traitor; she was only a slave convinced her role was to serve the master. History cannot condemn her when her only mistake was to be the perfect slave. Her importance comes from the fact that she was a woman, during the conquest of Mexico, who was able to rise above all Mexicans and transcend into history. Yet, she is remembered as La Malinche; the polemical figure who did “not only turn[ed] her back on her own people, [but] she joined the white men and became assimilated, serving as their guide and interpreter and generally assisting in the conquest.”³³ The term ‘malinchista’ identifies the “individual who sells out to the foreigner, who devalues national identity in favor of imported benefits,”³⁴ but her contributions are much more important than that. Cypess mentions the “conquest was the crucial event in the formation of [Mexican] male-female relations. In the way a Mexican man enjoys dominating a woman, wants service from her, and expects to impose his will and body on her and then dispose of her, he repeats the pattern Cortes established with La Malinche.”³⁵ Her role in the conquest of Mexico have different interpretations but for some Malintzin gave hope to the defeated tribes under the Aztec Empire; she gave birth to the Mexican identity, the Mexican character who is willing to fight and die for freedom and equality. Malintzin has not died but remains a latent force inside each Mexican.

³² Rutiaga Luis. *Grandes Mexicanos: Malitzin*. Mexico City, Grupo Editorial Tomo. April 2004, p.162-163

³³ Candelaria, Cordelia. “La Malinche, Feminist Prototype.” *Chicana Leadership*. Ed. Flores Niemann et all. Frontiers Publishing. 2002, p. 3

³⁴ Cypess, Sandra Messinger. *La Malinche in Mexican Literature: From History to Myth*. University of Texas, Austin. 1991 p.7

³⁵ *Ibid.*,

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Timeline

- 1502 – Aztec Emperor Ahuitzotl dies
Montezuma II gains power as Emperor of the Aztec Empire
- 1505 – Malinalli was born
- 1512 – Malinalli given to the Cacique of Tabasco
- 1518 – Grijalvas' expedition to Mexico
- 1519 – Cortes' expedition enters the Mexican coast
- 1520 – La Noche Triste: The Sad Night
– Aztec Emperor Montezuma II dies
- 1521 – Fall of the Aztec Empire
- 1522 – Charles V confirms Hernan Cortes as Governor of the New Spain
- 1523-1524 – Martin: Son of Cortes and Malinalli was born
- 1524 – Malintzin marries Juan Xaramillo de Salvatierra
- 1525 – Execution of the Last Aztec Emperor: Cuauhtémoc
- 1531 – Small Pox epidemic in the New Spain
Malintzin dies from Small Pox