

FROM LATIN AMERICA MALINCHE: HEROINE OR VILLAIN? AN OPEN DEBATE

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This study aims to carry out a critical and multidisciplinary analysis of the historical figure of La Malinche, based on a visual corpus made up of three emblematic images and a set of primary and secondary documentary sources. Through a methodological approach that combines tools, cultural anthropology and gender studies, it seeks to unravel the multiple layers of meaning that have been attributed to this character over time. The relevance of this research lies in the need to recontextualize the figure of La Malinche within the framework of the historical and cultural processes that shaped New Spain. By analyzing the visual and textual representations of La Malinche, we aim to identify the hegemonic discourses that have constructed and reconstructed her image, as well as the resistances and reinterpretations that have arisen over the centuries. The preliminary conclusions point to the complexity and ambiguity of this historical figure, who reveals herself as an indigenous woman trapped in a context of conflict and radical transformation. Her role as interpreter, counselor and mediator makes her an emblematic character, but also a controversial figure, whose interpretation remains the subject of debate.

Keywords: Woman, worldview, power, conquest

Introduction

"...When facing the problem of re-thinking Malintzin in the readings and interpretations of different authors, it becomes necessary to incorporate a particularly open attitude to the recognition of "other stories" or other horizons of questioning that underline the capacity for action and adaptation of the inhabitants of "these lands"; the cunning and ingenuity they had to deploy to deal with the obvious threat posed by the arrival of the Europeans; the powerful feminine and food, commercial and cultural networks they deployed to incorporate them into their humanity and their lineages, to appropriate their values and cultural assets, to modulate and channel their violence, to use them for their own benefit and survive..." Viveros Espinosa, A. J. (2021-98)

This study, based on the analysis of three images and various documentary sources, seeks to reexamine the historical figure of La Malinche, unraveling the multiple facets of this key character in the Conquest of Mexico. Through an interdisciplinary approach, it aims to overcome the stereotypical and polarized views that have predominated in traditional historiography. The relevance of this research lies in the need to understand how the social construction of Malinche has influenced Mexican national identity and interethnic relations. The methodology used combines iconographic analysis of the images with an exhaustive study of written sources, which allows us to identify the dominant discourses and changing representations of La Malinche over time. The first findings suggest that the image of this woman has been used instrumentally to legitimize diverse political and cultural projects, oscillating between demonization and exaltation. Preliminary conclusions point to the complexity and ambiguity of this historical figure, who reveals herself as an indigenous woman caught in a context of conflict and radical transformation. Her role as interpreter, counselor and mediator makes her

an emblematic character, but also a controversial figure, whose interpretation remains the subject of debate.

Investigation

We began our research taking into account the writings of Viveros Espinosa, A. J. (2021) on the particularity of this woman's name "... giving an account of some clarifications about Malintzin. Her presence alongside Hernán Cortés since 1519 is well known, however, little is known for certain about her previous life. Something we can affirm is that her name prior to meeting Cortés is not known with certainty, which allows us to persist in a still open and not just biographical approach to her figure. Therefore, an entry perspective is presented in the word Malintzin and its meanings in the Nahuatl language. In our analytical approach we recognize that the names: Marina, Malinalli, Malintzin and Malinche are heteronyms¹ that fragmentarily construct a historical experience that transcends the individuality of a human life..." (Viveros Espinosa, A. J. 2021, p.86) The text explores the complexity of the name "Malintzin" and its meaning in the context of the Conquest of Mexico. It is highlighted that this name is not unique and has been interpreted in various ways throughout history. The analysis focuses on the Nahuatl roots of the name, where "Malinalli" is translated as "twisted grass" or "liana", and "Malintzin" is interpreted as "noble prisoner" or "noble captive". It is argued that the transformation of the name from Malinalli to Malintzin and then to Malinche reflects the processes of colonization and acculturation, where indigenous names were adapted and reinterpreted by the Spanish.

For her part, Alcántara (2019) proposes a symbolic interpretation of the multiple names attributed to the indigenous woman in question. Onomastic polysemy stands as a metaphor for the life trajectory of this historical figure, characterized by a profound social transformation and upward and downward mobility in the hierarchical scale of Mesoamerican society. She

also suggests that the fluctuation between different names reflects the identity versatility of this woman, who moved from social marginality to occupy positions of power and prestige, rubbing shoulders with influential figures of her time. However, this rise was ephemeral, as she later experienced a decline that led her to historical ostracism. argues that the life of this indigenous woman represents an allegory of the power dynamics and social inequalities inherent to Mesoamerican societies, as well as the fragility of individual identities in the face of historical forces.

Santos, B. de S., and Meneses, M. P. (2014). offer us in their work an epistemological framework to understand the figure of Malinche, placing her in the context of intercultural and power relations during the Conquest of Mexico. By highlighting that knowledge is a product of social experiences and power relations, the text invites us to analyze the figure of Malinche as a meeting point and conflict between different epistemologies. Malinche, by acting as an intermediary between cultures, was exposed to multiple systems of beliefs

and values, which generated in her a hybrid and complex knowledge. Her role as translator and counselor placed her in a space of tension between different ways of validating knowledge, which is characteristic of situations of intercultural contact and inequality. In this sense, the figure of Malinche becomes a paradigmatic case to explore how power relations influence the production and dissemination of knowledge. His story shows us that knowledge is not a neutral product, but is shaped by social structures and relations of domination.

In analyzing the figure of Malinche, Echeverría (2005, pp. 161-184) immerses us in a historical-cultural analysis of great depth. By positioning Malinche as a central axis of his reflection, the author shows us how this character embodies the tension between different cultural worlds and how this encounter gave rise to a new way of being in the world. The figure of Malintzin thus becomes a lens through which we can better understand the processes of cultural hybridization that characterized the Latin American colonial world and that continue to influence our contemporary societies.



Image 1 (Brooks, D. 2019) Pre-Hispanic codices showing Malinche in her role as messenger and advisor.

Brooks D. (2019) in his article refers to Malinche “...Multilingualism put her in a very privileged place. But she was also considered the visible face of Cortés in the sense of the interpolation she could have with native peoples...”. The figure of Malinche, also known as Malintzin or Doña Marina, is one of the most complex and controversial in the history of Mexico and the Spanish conquest. As a translator and mediator between the Aztecs and the Spanish, she played a crucial role in the conquest of Tenochtitlán. Her origins and historical context: Malinche was born around 1496 in the Tabasco region, the daughter of an Aztec chief. She was sold as a slave to the Mayans and later given to Hernán Cortés as a gift when he arrived on the coast of Mexico in 1519. Her role as a translator and mediator, she quickly learned Spanish and became Cortés's main translator. Her knowledge of indigenous languages and her understanding of Aztec culture were fundamental to communication between the Spanish and the Aztecs. Malinche, along with Cortez, receives food from an aborigine to supply Cortés' men, reflecting her role as a

mediator and facilitator of the conquest. The gold objects that are given are also notable, symbolizing the wealth and power that the Spanish sought in New Spain. The figure of Malinche has been the subject of debate and reinterpretation throughout history. Some see her as a traitor who collaborated with the Spanish conquistadors, while others consider her a victim of circumstances who was forced to adapt to the new reality. In the context of the conquest, Malinche represented a cultural bridge between the Aztecs and the Spanish. Her role as translator and mediator allowed Cortés to better understand Aztec culture and politics, which facilitated the conquest of Tenochtitlán. However, it is also important to highlight that Malinche was a woman who lived in a context of violence and oppression.

In line with the findings of Salazar Lisboa (2017), the iconographic analysis of pre-Hispanic codices is revealed as a fundamental tool to unravel the sociocultural and political dynamics underlying the Conquest of America. By examining the visual representations of key figures such as Hernán Cortés and Malinche, the

author highlights the complexity of intercultural interactions and the construction of hybrid identities in this historical context. In particular, the figure of Malinche emerges as a central axis in the exploration of the process of mestizaje. Through a critical analysis of the various representations of this figure, Salazar Lisboa shows how the concept of mestizaje, beyond a mere biological description, stands as an ideological construction that has served to legitimize and perpetuate colo-

nial power relations. The author provides us with a valuable contribution to the field of historical and cultural studies by demonstrating the importance of analyzing images as primary sources to understand the processes of colonization and resistance. By revealing the hidden meanings and subaltern perspectives present in pre-Hispanic codices, the author invites us to reimagine dominant historical narratives and to recognize the complexity and diversity of human experiences in the past.



Image 2. Salazar Lisboa, E. F. (2017, p. 32) *Malinche with Cortés* (1952), Roberto Cueva del Río. Government Palace of Chilpancingo (Chilpancingo, Mexico).

The Cueva del Río work, "Malinche with Cortés", presents us with a complex and symbolic vision of the encounter between Spanish and indigenous cultures in Mexico. Through the figure of Cortés, associated with the return of the god Quetzalcoatl, the artist explores the beliefs and expectations of the Aztecs, who saw the arrival of the Spanish as the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy. The painting not only portrays a historical fact, but also delves into the realm of the mythical and the religious. By surrounding Cortés with llamas, Cueva del Río evokes Aztec divinity and underlines the confusion between the human and the divine experienced by the indigenous people. The presence of the nopal, a symbol rooted in Aztec culture, reinforces this connection between the conquistador and pre-Hispanic mythology. The figure of Moctezuma acquires special

relevance in this work. His submission to Cortés is interpreted as a consequence of the belief in the return of Quetzalcoatl. This situation reflects the complex power dynamics established between conquerors and conquered, and highlights the importance of religious beliefs in the construction of identities and social relations. The relationship between Malinche and Cortés, represented by their physical closeness, goes beyond simple linguistic mediation. The painting suggests an intimate union between both characters, anticipating the racial and cultural mixture that will characterize mestizaje. However, this union is not presented as a process of cultural assimilation, but rather as a biological fact, a meeting of bodies that will give rise to a new identity. (Salazar Lisboa, E. F. 2017, pp. 32-33).



Image 3. Fernandez, T. and Tamaro, E. (2024) *Hernan Cortes and the Malinche*

In a recent article by Fernández, T. and Tamaro, E. (2024) they describe the lights and shadows of the figure of La Malinche “Malinalli Tenépatl, called la Malinche or Doña Marina; Coatzacoalcos, present-day Veracruz, c. 1500 - Mexico City, c. 1527”. A Mesoamerican indigenous woman, interpreter and companion of Hernán Cortés, who played an important role in the process of conquest of Mexico. she has been the subject of numerous artistic and literary representations, often simplifying her historical role and reducing her to a stereotypical figure. The traditional image of Malinche alongside Hernán Cortés, as a simple lover or companion, hides the complexity and relevance of her role in the conquest process. These authors highlight the need to analyze the role of Malinche beyond a binary perspective of victim-villain. La Malinche was an indigenous woman who, in a complex historical context, played a fundamental role as interpreter, cultural mediator and survivor. Her ability to adapt to new situations, learn languages, and negotiate in a hostile environment made her a key figure in the conquest of Mexico. It is important to note that the representation of La Malinche is not neutral, but rather reflects the social constructions and dominant discourses of each era. The stereotypical image of Malinche as a traitor has served to justify the conquest and conceal colonial violence. However, this view has been challenged by various voices that seek to vindicate the figure of Malinche and recognize her historical agency.

In relation to what we have been describing, Domínguez A. (2023, pp.31-41) presents us with a complex and nuanced vision of Malinche, dismantling the historical stereotypes that reduce her to a simple traitor or victim. The author presents a deep and nuanced analysis of the historical figure of Malinche, offering a perspective that challenges traditional and stereotypical interpretations. Arguing that, far from being simply a traitor or a victim, she was an active agent in the historical processes of the Conquest of Mexico. The roles assigned to Malinche were key elements in her process of personal and social empowerment. One of

the most relevant aspects of this analysis is the deconstruction of the dominant historical narrative that has reduced Malintzin to a simple object of desire or a tool at the service of the Spanish conquerors. The author demonstrates how Malintzin, by becoming Cortés' interpreter and advisor, acquired significant power and managed to negotiate her position within the new colonial society. In this way, the author contributes significantly to the rewriting of Mexican history, offering a more complex and nuanced view of the figure of Malintzin. In doing so, the author invites us to reflect on the importance of indigenous women in the formation of Mexican national identity and to question the dominant historical narratives.

First Findings

The name Malintzin presents a multifaceted vision, emphasizing its symbolic character and its connection with the history and culture of Mesoamerica. Through the analysis of the name, we seek to better understand the figure of Malintzin and her role in the Conquest.

The myth that communication was an insurmountable obstacle in the conquest is debunked by Restall (2003, pp. 77-99). He shows us how mediation, especially through figures such as La Malinche, was a crucial element in the process of negotiation and alliance that led to the fall of the Mexica and Inca empires. These mediating agents played an active role in shaping historical events.

We look at the figure of Malinche from an epistemological perspective, emphasizing the complexity and diversity of knowledge that coexisted during the Conquest. This perspective allows us to deconstruct simplistic representations of Malinche and understand her as a complex historical subject, whose actions were the product of a particular historical and social context.

Image analysis is a fundamental tool for understanding the historical and cultural processes that shaped colonial America. By unraveling the symbolic meanings and visual narratives contained in these

works, we can construct a more complete and nuanced view of the Conquest and its consequences.

From the figure of Malinche, it is possible to delve into the problem of historical consciousness Gadamer, (2011, pp. 41-53), critically reexamining the processes of construction of historical memory around the Conquest of Mexico. Through this figure, the importance of hermeneutics can be revalued to understand the complexities of historical interpretation and the multiple perspectives involved in the construction of stories about the past.

Conclusions

La Malinche is a pivotal figure in the complex historical framework of the Spanish conquest of Mexico. Her role as interpreter, counselor, and eventually as consort to Hernán Cortés has placed her at the center of a historical and sociocultural debate that continues to this day.

Historical and Sociocultural Implications

From a historical perspective, La Malinche embodies the confluence of multiple factors that radically transformed the future of Mesoamerica.

- Cultural intermediation: Her linguistic mastery and adaptive capacity made her an essential element in the communication between Spanish and indigenous cultures. This intermediary role not only facilitated the conquest, but also accelerated it, by allowing a deeper understanding of the social and political dynamics of Mesoamerican civilizations.

- Symbol of cultural hybridization: The relationship between La Malinche and Cortés represents a milestone in the history of cultural hybridization. Her mestizo offspring became a symbol of the new society emerging from the conquest, a society marked by the mixture of blood, cultures and traditions.

Contemporary Relevance

The figure of La Malinche continues to be the subject of study and debate today due to her ability to illuminate fundamental questions about identity, history and the construction of power.

- Decolonization of history: La Malinche has become a symbol of the need to decolonize history and rewrite historical narratives from indigenous perspectives and the place of women.

- Intersectionality: Her experience as an indigenous woman in a context of conquest allows us to analyze the intersections of gender, race and class in the construction of identity and power.

- Debate on the nation: La Malinche is a starting point for reflecting on the construction of the Mexican nation and the processes of mestizaje that have shaped its identity.

This research invites us to rethink the figure of this woman independently of the names assigned to her: Malintzin, Marina or Malinche, beyond the stereotype

of traitor, proposing her as a key figure in the process of the conquest of Mexico. By analyzing her role as translator and mediator between two cultures, the complexity of the relationships established during this historic encounter is highlighted. The conquest, far from being a unilateral imposition, is revealed as a process of constant interaction and negotiation, in which Malintzin emerges as a "codephagic agent", capable of moving between different cultural and linguistic worlds. This new approach allows us to understand the conquest as a multidirectional and constantly evolving process, and challenges us to continue exploring Malintzin's legacy and her influence on the construction of Mexican identity. Her story reminds us of the importance of understanding the cultural and historical complexity of the conquest and the impact it had on indigenous communities as well as society in general.

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