SOFTWARE & TECH

The Broken Spears The Aztecs Account Of The Conquest Of Mexico By Miguel Leon Po

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Introduction

For centuries, the story of the fall of the Aztec Empire was told almost exclusively through the eyes of the Spanish conquistadors. The dramatic narrative of Hernán Cortés and his small band of men toppling a vast civilization was a tale of bravery, divine providence, and European superiority. Yet that celebrated version left out a crucial voice: the vanquished. In 1959, Mexican historian and anthropologist Miguel León-Portilla published a groundbreaking work that would forever change our understanding of this pivotal moment in history. **The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico** (original Spanish title: *Visión de los vencidos*) compiles indigenous accounts, gathered from Nahuatl codices and oral traditions, presenting the conquest as it was experienced by the Mexica people themselves. This article offers a comprehensive exploration of this essential text, its origins, its themes, and its enduring legacy. Whether you are a student of history, a lover of literature, or simply curious about alternative perspectives, the journey through **The Broken Spears** is both humbling and enlightening.

The Historical Context: Why This Book Was Necessary

The traditional historiography of the Spanish conquest of Mexico (1519–1521) relied heavily on the writings of men like Bernal Díaz del Castillo and Hernán Cortés. Their accounts, while detailed, were shaped by the biases of the victors: the desire to justify colonial expansion, to glorify the Spanish crown, and to present the indigenous peoples as either noble savages or bloodthirsty heathens. For nearly four centuries, the indigenous perspective remained buried in archives – written in Nahuatl, often dismissed as folklore, or simply ignored. It was not until the mid-twentieth century that scholars began a serious re-examination of these sources. Miguel León-Portilla, a pioneer in the study of Nahuatl literature and philosophy, recognized that the native texts contained not just facts, but a profound human testimony – a record of trauma, courage, and cultural resilience. **The Broken Spears**emerged from this effort, offering a counter-narrative that challenged the romanticized view of the conquest and gave voice to the conquered.

The Source Material

León-Portilla drew from a variety of documents, most notably the *Florentine Codex*, compiled under the supervision of the Spanish friar Bernardino de Sahagún. Sahagún, who arrived in Mexico after the conquest, interviewed indigenous elders and scribes, recording their memories in Nahuatl with Spanish translations. Other sources include the *Annals of Tlatelolco*, the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, and various poems and songs preserved by the Nahua people. These texts are not simple chronicles; they blend history, prophecy, lament,

and poetry. The metaphor of “broken spears” comes from an Aztec poem that mourns the shattered
Broken spears lie in the roads; we have torn our hair in grief.” This image encapsulates the sense of ruin and sorrow that permeates the indigenous accounts.

The Narrative from the Indigenous Viewpoint

What makes **The Broken Spears** so powerful is the way it tells the story not from the generals’ tents but from the streets of Tenochtitlan. The book begins before the Spaniards arrive, describing omens that the Aztecs interpreted as signs of impending doom. A comet streaked across the sky; the temple of Huitzilopochtli caught fire without cause; a weeping woman was heard at night. These omens, recorded in the Codex Florentino, set a tone of premonition and fatalism. Unlike the Spanish chronicles that present Cortés as a masterful strategist, the indigenous accounts show a people trying to understand a strange and terrifying invasion.

The Arrival of the Strangers

The narrative details the arrival of the Spaniards on the Gulf Coast, their march toward the Valley of Mexico, and their alliances with native enemies of the Aztecs, particularly the Tlaxcalans. From the indigenous perspective, these events were not a unified “conquest” but a series of bewildering encounters. The Aztec ruler Moctezuma II is portrayed not as a weak fool (as in some Spanish accounts) but as a conflicted leader paralyzed by religious and political uncertainty. His decision to welcome Cortés into Tenochtitlan is presented as a catastrophic miscalculation born from the belief that the Spaniards might be gods – a belief that the Spanish cleverly exploited. The book includes Moctezuma’s own reported speeches, his lamentations, and the famous scene where he is taken hostage by Cortés. The indigenous writers convey a deep sense of betrayal and shame.

The Siege and Fall of Tenochtitlan

The climax of **The Broken Spears** is the brutal siege of Tenochtitlan in 1521. While Spanish accounts focus on military tactics and the valor of the conquistadors, the indigenous narrative emphasizes the suffering of the common people. The city, an island in Lake Texcoco, was cut off from food and fresh water. Disease, especially smallpox, ravaged the population. The text describes the horrifying sight of corpses piling in the canals, women and children wailing, and the final desperate resistance. The “broken spears” are not just symbolic; they represent the actual destruction of the Aztec army. In one poignant passage, a Nahua poet recalls: “*We have pounded our hands against the adobe walls, for our inheritance, our city, is lost and dead.*” This intimate, emotional rendering makes the reader feel the weight of the loss.

Key Themes in the Indigenous Account

The Broken Spears is not merely a chronicle of events; it explores profound themes that resonate across history.

- Cultural Trauma and Resilience: The accounts reveal a civilization grappling with an unimaginable catastrophe. Yet even in the midst of destruction, the indigenous scribes preserved their history, a testament to their resilience. The act of recording the story in Nahuatl, often with hidden meanings, was a form of resistance.
- Moral Ambiguity and Misunderstanding: Unlike the simplistic “good versus evil” framework of many colonial texts, the indigenous perspective shows that both sides operated with different worldviews. The Aztecs interpreted the war through the lens of their own religious beliefs, while the Spanish saw it as a crusade for Christianity and gold. The result was a clash that neither side fully understood at the time.
- The Role of Prodigies and Fate: The omens and prophecies in the book suggest that the Aztecs viewed the conquest as a cosmic event, perhaps even predestined. This fatalism, however, did not lead to passivity; many accounts celebrate the bravery of warriors who fought to the death.
- The Voices of Women and Commoners: One of the most valuable aspects of León-Portilla’s compilation is

how it includes voices that are usually absent from elite historical records. Mothers mourning their children, market sellers observing the chaos, and ordinary citizens hiding in the ruins all appear in the texts. This democratization of history is a hallmark of modern historiography.

The Significance and Legacy of The Broken Spears

Since its publication, **The Broken Spears**has become a foundational text in Mexican history and Latin American studies. It has been translated into many languages and is widely used in universities and high schools. Its impact extends far beyond academia.

Challenging Colonial Narratives

León-Portilla's work was revolutionary because it insisted that the conquered had a story worth telling. In doing so, it anticipated the postcolonial currents that would later reshape historical scholarship. The book encourages readers to question who gets to write history and why. For many Mexicans and indigenous people today, **The Broken Spears**is a source of pride – a validation that their ancestors were not passive victims but complex actors with their own perspectives.

Influence on Literature and Art

The poetic language of the original Nahuatl sources, as translated by León-Portilla, has inspired generations of writers, poets, and artists. The imagery of broken spears and weeping streets appears in murals, novels, and even music. The book also helped preserve a literary tradition that might have otherwise been forgotten. The Nahua poems of the conquest, such as "The Fall of Tenochtitlan," are now studied as masterpieces of world literature.

Criticisms and Debates

No work is without its critics. Some scholars argue that León-Portilla, while providing a vital indigenous perspective, still filtered the sources through his own interpretive lens. Others note that the book focuses heavily on the Aztecs of Tenochtitlan, giving less attention to other Nahua groups or to the indigenous allies of the Spanish. Additionally, because the sources were recorded decades after the events and often in collaboration with Spanish missionaries, questions of authenticity and memory inevitably arise. However, even skeptics acknowledge that **The Broken Spears**opened a door that cannot be closed. It remains a starting point for understanding the conquest from within.

Why This Book Remains Relevant Today

In an era when decolonization of knowledge is a global conversation, **The Broken Spears**offers a timeless lesson. It reminds us that history is never a single story but a cacophony of voices – some loud, some whispered, some silenced. The book also speaks to themes of cultural survival. Despite the violent destruction of their empire, the descendants of the Aztecs continue to speak Nahuatl, celebrate their traditions, and assert their identity. The broken spears have been mended, not as weapons, but as symbols of a living heritage. For readers who approach this text, the reward is not just historical knowledge but a profound empathy for those who lived through what the Nahua called "the night of sorrows."

Conclusion

The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico by Miguel León-Portilla is far more than a historical document. It is a literary masterpiece, a moral reckoning, and an invitation to listen to the voices that were once silenced. By placing the indigenous perspective at the center, León-Portilla transformed our understanding of 1521 and challenged the very way we think about conquest, loss, and memory. The book's enduring popularity – now in its expanded edition with additional readings and illustrations – proves that

there is an insatiable hunger for stories that honor the complexity of human experience. Whether you are picking it up for the first time or returning to it after years, the words of the ancient Nahua poets still weep as they *"friends, know that with these calamities we have lost the Mexican nation."* But through this book, that nation is never truly lost. It lives on in every reader who dares to see history through the eyes of the broken spears.

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