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“The Vision of the Vanquished”

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*In Ihiyo, in Ilahtol. Su aliento, su palabra.
Homenaje a Miguel León-Portilla*

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THE VISION OF THE VANQUISHED*

J. JORGE KLOR DE ALVA

The victors ordinarily write history. The losers are usually silenced or, if this is impossible, they are dismissed as liars, censored for being traitors, or left to circulate harmlessly in the confined spaces of the defeated. Bringing marginalized perspectives to light is therefore a revolutionary act of some importance: it can subvert dominant understandings, it might inspire other victims to raise their voice and pen their protests, and it always forces old histories to be rewritten to include or at least respond to the vision of the vanquished.

For almost 450 years the history of the conquest of Mexico —perhaps the most consequential meeting of cultures ever— was based overwhelmingly on Spanish accounts. These had the effect of creating a series of false images, the most important being that the defeat of the Aztecs of Mexico-Tenochtitlan —always “by a handful of Spaniards”— meant the complete collapse of all native polities and civilization. Traditionalist authors wanted us to understand that Spaniards had triumphed against great odds and had succeeded in bringing about not only military and political conquests but also spiritual, linguistic, and cultural ones. A defeated, silent people, we were asked to believe, had been reduced to subservience and quickly disappeared as Indians to become mestizos, or had simply retreated into rural landscapes.

With probing intelligence, scholarly rigor, and humanist concern, Miguel León-Portilla, the dean of contemporary Nahuatl studies since 1956,¹ has been at the forefront of the struggle to bring the voices of past and present indigenous peoples of Mexico within hearing distance of the rest of the world. And no book has contributed more to this effort than this one. From the time *The Broken Spears* was first published by the National

* This text reproduces in great part the “Foreword” by J. J. Klor de Alva to the 1992 enlarged edition of *The Broken Spears, The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico* (English rendering of *Visión de los Vencidos*) published by The Beacon Press, Boston, 1992. The author thanks The Beacon Press for letting him quote largely from it.

¹ See his doctoral dissertation, originally published in 1956, M. León-Portilla, *La filosofía náhuatl estudiada en sus fuentes*, fourth ed. México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1974; first paperback edition in English *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990.

University of Mexico in 1959 —as *Visión de los vencidos* (Vision of the Vanquished)—hundreds of thousands of copies have appeared in Spanish alone, including those printed in Cuba and Spain. Many tens of thousands have also been printed in French, Italian, German, Hebrew, Polish, Swedish, Hungarian, Serbo-Croatian, Portuguese, Japanese, Catalan and even in Braille characters. The English edition, which first came out in 1967, has gone through numerous printings, with tens of thousands of copies sold since 1974. This great international reception among specialists and lay readers, the book's extraordinarily wide readership in Mexico, and its extensive use in universities and colleges throughout the United States are due to a number of related factors.

First, the documents included in all editions address topics that have become urgent throughout the so-called Third World in the last fifty years. Interest in the nature of native perspectives started when the decolonization of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East was set in motion at the end of World War II, and grew following the insurrections and revolutions of Latin America, beginning with Cuba's in 1959. Ever since, postcolonial nations and those wishing to overthrow oppressive governments have been searching for their indigenous truths and have been busily rewriting their (colonial) histories to match their postindependence aspirations. These efforts have included the quest for models to help make sense of the ways in which the dominated at home and abroad have resisted, adapted, and survived.

A remarkable discussion of how this book has served as such a model is found in the prologue to its 1969 Cuban edition, written by one of El Salvador's greatest poets and popular historians, Roque Dalton.² The Central American author underlined the universality and inspirational nature of the book by observing that, although the documents referred to the conquest of Mexico, "their typicality is such that they constitute a valid testimony of the general conquest of the American continent... [Indeed,] the set of confusions, acts of cowardice, heroisms, and resistances of the Mexicans is very representative of the corresponding attitudes of all the American peoples in the face of the arrival of the conqueror.... [And] these indigenous accounts and poems can contribute valuable data to use in locating the roots of the historical violence of Latin America." Dalton, who died in 1975 while fighting in his country's civil war, concludes by noting that, while León-Portilla had dedicated his book to students and nonspecialists, "the Cuban edition of these texts is dedicated to the Cuban and Latin American revolutionaries, especially those who, arms in hand, fight in the mountains and the cities against the conquerors [and] Tlaxcalans... of today, those who refuse to permit our historical epoch to close with a vision of defeat."

² M. León-Portilla, *Visión de los vencidos*, prologue by Roque Dalton, Havana: Casa de las Américas, 1969.



Second, for Mexicans on both sides of the border the story of the Aztecs (or Mexicas, as the residents of Mexico-Tenochtitlan called themselves) has played a critical historical and symbolic role in the formation of their collective identity. In particular, the tale of the Mexicas has served as the national “charter myth,” standing behind every important nation-building legend or initiative. As a consequence, Jose Emilio Pacheco, one of Mexico’s foremost writers, dared to speak for all Mexicans, Indians and mestizos, when claiming the book was “a great epic poem of the origins of our nationality.” And he did not hesitate to add that it was “a classic book and an indispensable work for all Mexicans.”³ In support of this appraisal the National University of Mexico has published more copies of *Visión de los vencidos* than of any other text in its long history, hundreds of thousands, when in Mexico printings of nonfiction rarely number more than three thousand.

Third, the Nahuatl narratives in this collection, in the more recent English Edition (Beacon Press, 1992 and several reprints), which includes texts from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, contribute to our understanding of some of the most important concerns in the world today, especially in the more multicultural nations of Europe and in the United States. These include the challenge of cultural pluralism and social diversity and the search for common ground in a sea of ethnic differences. Independent of nationality or political persuasion, readers who have an interest in the profound political, demographic, and cultural transformations of our anxious age have found something of importance in this work. Not surprisingly, it has become, as Pacheco claimed, a classic book, particularly among those in search of an affirming voice from a non Western “other.” In hundreds of U.S. college classes, from coast to coast, this book has created the occasion for fruitful conversation on the past and present nature of ethnic identity, nationalism, racial conflict, and cultural resistance and adaptation. And as Dalton may have known, by making evident the ancient paths of tragedy, heroism, and resolve, this book has been an inspiration and a guide for U.S. Latinos, especially Chicanos (Mexican Americans), as they attempt to cope, endure, and triumph in the face of adversity or indifference.

Lastly, since its debut readers everywhere have recognized this book as a “great read.” León-Portilla, an eloquent writer and a masterful editor, has braided in chronological order a series of episodes —most of which were first translated by the pioneer of Nahuatl studies, Ángel Ma. Garibay K.— that make the Nahua responses to the Spaniards, and each other, come alive with pain, pathos, desperation, and fear, along with

³ Quoted in the prologue by R. Moreno de los Arcos, M. León-Portilla, *Visión de los vencidos*, rev. ed. México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1989, p. 5. On the allure and significance of the “Aztecs” in Mexico and among Mexicans in the United States, see my introduction to M. León-Portilla, *The Aztec Image of Self and Society: An Introduction to Nahua Culture*, ed. J. J. Klor de Alva Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992.

powerful life-affirming doses of heroism, strength, and determination. The conquest of Mexico is freed from the triumphalist Spanish interpretations to which it has been moored for hundreds of years and set adrift in a sea of enigmas, contradictions, revisions, and discoveries when the Nahuas themselves are permitted to tell the tale their way and in their own words. But after all that has happened historically to the Aztecs and to their image in Western thought, what we mean when we say the Nahuas can now “tell the tale their way” is not obvious.

To Whom Can we Attribute the Vision of the Vanquished?

To understand the historical parameters of the documents translated and introduced, and thereby to elucidate what we mean by “the Aztec account of the conquest of Mexico,” two related questions need to be examined. First, could the Nahuas have written in alphabetic writing (“in their own words”) their view of the first encounter events, especially as early as 1528? Second, whose visions are actually presented in these documents?

Eyewitness accounts of the events and sentiments depicted in these documents are more likely to be reliable if the texts were written within twenty years of the fall of Tenochtitlan, that is, before 1541. León-Portilla claims that the descriptions taken from the anonymous manuscript of Tlatelolco (chapter 14) were in fact “written as early as 1528, only seven years after the fall of the city.” If this is correct, the work could surely contain accurate testimonies of people who personally took part in the defense of the Mexica capital. But is it historically possible for Nahuatl to have been written by Nahuas at such an early date? A few observations may help to answer this question.

Pedro de Gante, the well-known mendicant educator, wrote a letter in 1532 explaining to Emperor Charles V that, since his arrival in New Spain nine years earlier, he had learned Nahuatl and had had “the responsibility of teaching the children and young men to read and write” it. “And without lying,” he added, “I can vouch that there are good writers and eloquent preachers... that if one did not see, one would not believe.”⁴ In another letter, written the same year and also addressed to the emperor, Fray Martín de Valencia and some fellow Franciscans state how since their arrival in 1524 they have taken young Nahuatl noblemen into their monasteries “and thereby with great labor we have taught them to read and write [Nahuatl]... and already they themselves have become teachers and preachers of their parents and elders.”⁵

⁴ *Cartas de Indias* (Madrid: Ediciones Atlas, 1974), p. 52.

⁵ Toribio de Benavente (Motolinía), *Memoriales o libro de las cosas de la Nueva España y de los naturales de allá*, ed. E. O’Gorman, México, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1971, p. 439, 444.

Furthermore, in his defense against the charges brought against him by the president of the First Audiencia (then the highest court and governing body in New Spain), Fray Juan de Zumárraga, the first bishop of Mexico, included the testimonies of people who spoke about the linguistic efforts of the earliest Franciscan missionaries. In this 1531 document a certain Juan de las Casas is said to have formally declared that following his arrival in Mexico City in 1526 “this witness has seen a written grammar used to teach the Indians to read and write. And that he has seen some of the said Indians write about the things of our Catholic faith in their language.”⁶

Likewise, García Holguín, then a minor official in the city, stated that “this witness has seen that all the religious [mendicant friars] have learned the language of this New Spain [i.e., Nahuatl] and have produced a grammar in order to learn it better.”

The list of witnesses continues, each faithfully attesting to the existence of early grammars and to the ability of Nahuas to write their language. Zumárraga’s document thus confirms what later chroniclers, such as Fray Gerónimo de Mendieta would assert: From a very early date the Franciscans who arrived in 1524 learned the language, wrote grammars, and taught the natives to read and write it.⁷ On the basis of these statements, and our recognition that the older elite students were already familiar with a literate world that included detailed historical records, we can feel confident that by 1528 there certainly could have been Nahuas capable of writing their language in Latin script.

Although documents in alphabetic Nahuatl do not become commonplace until the middle of the century, a related series of Nahuatl census records from the area of Cuernavaca appear to have been written between 1535 and 1545.⁸ And in 1541 the cacique of Tlalmanalco, Francisco de Sandoval Acaztlí (Acacitl), dictated a diary, which his secretary Gabriel Castañeda inscribed in Nahuatl, while on the expedition to Nueva Galicia led by Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza.⁹ We also have various Nahuatl glosses in some codices (native picto-glyphic texts) that can reasonably be dated as prior to 1540. Consequently, although it is truly remarkable that the anonymous *Manuscrito de Tlatelolco*, quoted in chapter 14, could have

⁶ Legajo 1006, Archivo General de Indias, Seville. Quoted in A. H. de León-Portilla, *Tepuztlahcuilolli: Impresos en Náhuatl, Historia y Bibliografía*, México, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1988, vol. 1, p. 11-12.

⁷ Gerónimo de Mendieta, *Historia eclesiástica Indiana*, México, Editorial Porrúa, 1971, p. 550-53.

⁸ See R. Haskett, *Indigenous Rulers: An Ethnohistory of Town Government in Colonial Cuernavaca* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991; S. L. Cline, *the Book of Tributes: Early Sixteenth-Century Nahuatl Censuses from Morelos Los Angeles*, UCLA Latin American Center, forthcoming).

⁹ “Relación de la jornada que hizo D. Francisco de Sandoval Acaztlí” in *Colección de documentos para la historia de México*, de J. García Icazbalceta, 2 vols. México, Editorial Porrúa, 1971, vol. 1, p. XIV, 307-332.

been written almost ten years before the Cuernavaca censuses and Acazitli journal, it is perfectly reasonable to assume that we are not being misled when we read in the text that “this paper was written thus; it is already a long time that it was done here in Tlatelolco, in the year of 1528.”¹⁰

I now turn to the second and more important question: Whose visions are actually presented in these documents?

Whether the manuscript of 1528 was penned at that early date, as seems possible, or a few years later, it is nonetheless the oldest surviving indigenous narrative account of the conquest of Mexico. However, the *icnocuicatl* (songs of sorrow), which make up the poems of chapters 14 and 15, may have originated at an even earlier date. León-Portilla notes, the “elegy for Tenochtitlan” may have been conceived in 1524, while the poem titled “The Fall of Tenochtitlan” may date from the year before.¹¹ The exact years of composition, however, are not as important as the possibility that both poems reflect the sentiments of authors who could have taken part on the sad events and shared the sorrow expressed.

In this regard, it bears mentioning that the tree poems in chapter 15 are found in the literature collection *Cantares Mexicanos*.¹² This means that the “songs” that are relevant to us in this compilation, those vivid verses from the oral tradition of the nobility of Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco and perhaps Azcapotzalco, were collected and inscribed in alphabetic Nahuatl starting in the 1550s (the majority of them) and ending sometime in the early 1580s.¹³ Poets who had been in their twenties at the time of the conquest, therefore, would only have been in their fifties when the bulk of the songs were written. These poets, to the extent permitted by the rapidly changing political and demographic conditions of the sixteenth century, would have been continuing the tradition of oral literature that had long enjoyed widespread support among the Nahuas, reflecting the social importance given to poetic composition and oral performance among pre-conquest Nahuas that the mestizo chronicler, Juan Bautista de Pomar, described in 1582:

¹⁰ “Relato de la conquista por un autor anónimo de Tlatelolco”, trans. Ángel Ma. Garibay K., in Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, third. Ed., A. M. Garibay K., México, Editoria Porrúa, 1975, p. 822.

¹¹ His observation is based on A. M. Garibay K., vol. 2, México, Editorial Porrúa, 1971, p. 90. The translation to “broken spears” requires that “o” and “mitl” (arrow, dart, spear) be maintained separate in the Nahuatl text, which reads *auh in otlica o mill xaxamantoc*. If the “o” and “mitl” are joined to read *omilt* (bone, awl), a second meaning, and perhaps an important intended pun, is found which would render the phrase: “broken bones lie in the road[s].”

¹² MS 1628 bis, Biblioteca Nacional, Mexico City. For a very controversial edition in English, see J. Bierhorst, *Cantares Mexicanos: Songs of the Aztecs*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1985.

¹³ See J. Lockhart, “Care, Ingenuity, and Irresponsibility: The Bierhorst Edition on *Cantares Mexicanos*” *Reviews in Anthropology* 16, 1991, 119-132; Gordon Brotherston, “Songs and Sagas of the Old New World”, *Times Library Supplement*, April 18, 1986, p. 407-408.

To be esteemed and famous, a great effort was made by nobles and even commoners, if they were not dedicated to warfare, to compose songs in which they introduced as history many successful and adverse events, and notable deeds of the kings and illustrious and worthy people. And whoever reached perfection in this skill was recognized and greatly admired, because he would thereby almost immortalize with these songs the memory and fame of the things composed in them and thus would be rewarded, not only by the king, but by all the rest of the nobility.¹⁴

Thus the ancient and flourishing Nahua tradition of lyrical composition and oral performance noted by Pomar would have constituted a fertile environment in which, during and following the conquest, these bards could have produced stories and poems capturing the pathos, tragedy, and heroism of the defeated Mexicans and Tlatelolcas. This would be especially likely among the native nobility that was desirous of preserving the memory of a once glorious past and adamant about explaining (or excusing) the failure of Mexico-Tlatelolco to stand up to, or defeat, the Spanish-led forces of their indigenous enemies.

The songs of the *Cantares* appear to have been collected and inscribed by Nahua scholars working with the missionary-ethnographer Bernardino de Sahagún. These native researchers were also responsible for setting down on paper the content of Book 12 of the *Florentine Codex*, the major Nahuatl source of the accounts in this book. Along with rendering in script the texts of oral tradition, which included compositions from the pre-conquest, conquest, and subsequent periods, these indigenous investigators worked with picto-glyphic (and perhaps some alphabetic) documents. In turn, these were interpreted for them by over a dozen elders who, as León-Portilla affirms, were picked from among those best informed about the ancient practices and beliefs, and for being the most likely to have experienced the conquest in person.

Sahagún himself wrote in the foreword to Book that “this history... was written at a time when those who took part in the very Conquest were alive... And those who gave this account [were] principal persons of good judgment, and it is believed they told all the truth.”¹⁵ In the foreword to the 1585 revision of the conquest story Sahagún reconfirms this point: “When this manuscript was written (which is now over thirty years ago [i.e., 1555]) everything was written in the Mexican language and was afterwards put into Spanish. Those who helped me write it were prominent

¹⁴ “Romances de los Señores de la Nueva España, Manuscrito de Juan Bautista Pomar, Tezcoco, 1582”, in *Poesía Náhuatl*, ed. and trans. A. M. Garibay K., 3 vols., México, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1964, vol. 1, p. 190.

¹⁵ Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex, Introductory Volume*, trans. and ed. A. J. O. Anderson and C. E. Dibble, no. 14, pt. 1, Santa Fe and Salt Lake City, School of American Research and University of Utah Press, 1982, p.101.

elders, well versed in all matters... who were present in the war when this city [Tlatelolco] was conquered.”¹⁶

It is of considerable significance that, like most of the germane poems in the *Cantares* collection, Book 12 is drawn primarily from the testimonies of informants from Tlatelolco and Tenochtitlan. And the same can be said for all other sustained Nahuatl narratives that appear to have been composed by eyewitnesses of the catastrophic events. For example, the second longest series of conquest episodes, the aptly titled “anonymous manuscript of 1528,” is from Tlatelolco. The so-called *Codex Aubin*, the *Anales de México y Tlatelolco*, and the pertinent sections of the *Códice Ramírez*, which although found in Spanish were most likely based on Nahuatl sources, are likewise of Tenochtitlan or Tlatelolco provenance.

Why, with the likely exception of the 1528 text, were all the relevant Mexica—i.e., Tenochca and Tlatelolca—narratives and legendary tales about the arrival of the Spaniards and the collapse of their two-part city written during or after the 1550s? One response is obvious. Although the most important accounts were written under the watchful eye of the missionaries, this was the time when Nahuatl alphabetic literacy extended beyond the Spanish centers of education and began to take on an independent life of its own in Indian towns. This was also a period of quick demographic decline due to widespread epidemics. The changing demography, in turn, was promoting local political rearrangements around newly organized indigenous municipal governments, which in turn were resulting in intensely assertive micropatriotisms. And all this was taking place as Nahua-Spanish contacts were becoming more frequent, longer lasting, and more complex.¹⁷

Although many of the descriptions in Book 12 and the 1528 manuscript are evidently those of specific eyewitnesses, or are reconstructions of their accounts, most are based on various anonymous stories that were retold and perhaps formally performed numerous times, with additions, modifications, inventions, and transpositions constantly enriching the recitations. As is typical in the Amerindian world, it was not a matter of individual, subjective perspectives being captured for posterity; instead, what we have in these conquest narratives are collective memories, reflecting common understandings, shared feelings, and group legends and mythologies. This, after all, is the way a dynamic oral tradition functions. But in the middle of the sixteenth-century the noblemen and literate members of the defeated communities were also stimulated to write by very pragmatic considerations: the need to safeguard their quickly slipping position as best they could, the need to excuse the strategic and military

¹⁶ Bernardino de Sahagún, *Conquest of New Spain: 1585 Revision*, trans. Howard F. Cline, ed. S. L. Cline (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1989), p. 2-25.

¹⁷ See J. J. Klor de Alva, “Language, Politics, and Translation: Colonial Discourse and Classical Nahuatl in New Spain”, in *The Art of Translation: Voices from the Field*, ed. Rosanna Warren, Boston, Northeastern University Press, 1989, p. 143-162.



failure of Motecuhzoma and others, and, equally important, the need to express in redeeming terms the tragic fall of a glorious state.

It is of great importance to observe in the sixteenth-century texts that the Spaniards are rarely judged in moral terms, and Cortés is only sporadically considered a villain. It seems to have been commonly understood that the Spaniards did what any other group would have done or would have been expected to do if the opportunity had existed. Indeed, as the documents here reveal, when the occasion arose, the Tlaxcalan and Huexotzincas joined right in to defeat the Mexicas, their traditional foes. Each community strove to be an independent city-state. Each saw all others who were not their allies as the “other,” whether Indian or Spanish. In this resides the central reason for the fall of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, and this reasoning helps to weave all the documents in this book into a single story: of defeat for some, of reaffirmation for others.

Beyond the Sixteenth Century

The timely new English edition of *The Broken Spears (Visión de los Vencidos)* has been amply enriched by a concluding chapter that demonstrates how the revindicating voice of the Nahuas endured and continues to endure on the lips of the descendants of the vanquished. In these Nahuatl testimonies from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries we can witness not only the vitality of five hundred years of oral tradition focused on the conquest and its aftermath, but also the rhetorical force of over 460 years of literary composition in Nahuatl.

Today, in the poems of Joel Martínez Hernández, as in the eighteenth-century testimony from San Tomás Ajusco or the 1918 manifestos of Emiliano Zapata, a forceful, poetic discourse is placed at the service of the much-abused and frequently dismissed communities. Fighting against great odds, the one and a half million contemporary Nahuas are going beyond simply insisting on maintaining the integrity of their culture, by busily adding to their inheritance. Working with Professor León-Portilla in his seminar on Nahuatl culture and language at the National University of Mexico, a number of Nahua poets and historians have reappropriated ancient and colonial Nahua sources and have transformed them into living expressions of an indomitable spirit. Five hundred years after the encounter between the two worlds, ancient Nahua beliefs, modified by centuries of conflict, adaptation, and innovation, continue to inspire Nahuas to engage in what the editor of this book correctly describes as “the production of a new literature,” or, as the Nahuas call it, a *Yancuic Tlahtolli*, a New Word.

Nahuas, however, are not the only ones who have benefited from León-Portilla’s untiring examination of Nahua culture and colonial Mexico. Inspired primarily by his research and numerous publications, in the



thirty years since this book appeared, Nahua studies have undergone a dramatic transformation. In Mexico, the United States, and Europe hundreds of scholars have set themselves to the task of researching into the Nahua past and present. Many, following León-Portilla's example, have learned the language and plunged into the sea of documents and chronicles that exist in Nahuatl. Thanks to this, today we are at last beginning to understand the intricacies of this amazing culture, which was the equal of any in Europe in moral refinement, artistic sensibility, social complexity, and political organization.

Because 1992 marked the quincentennial of Columbus's first voyage, it was particularly appropriate to introduce a new edition of this far-reaching book on "the encounter between the two worlds." As an intellectual, a humanist, and lifelong student of Amerindian cultures, León-Portilla, the first coordinator of Mexico's National Quincentenary Commission, urged responsible debate and rational reflection on this emblematic and problematic moment. In many and varied forums, he consistently rejected "celebrations" of "discoveries," championing instead thoughtful reassessments of the "encounter" that can lead us to more authentic, empathetic, and just understandings of the American past. These are admirable goals to which the *Vision of the Vanquished* was an early superb contribution.