

## FROM THE HISTORY CORNER

By Baron Sir Paul de Marseilles

### ***Who was Malinali (also known as Malintzin, Malinalli, Dona Marina, or La Malinche) and why was she important in the Spanish Conquest of Mexico?***

Malinali was a slave who helped bring about the downfall of one of the mightiest Empires that existed in the New World. She was born sometime before 1500 in the village of Painalla at the north end of the Yucatan peninsula, in present day Honduras. By 1200, the great Mayan Empire had broken up into a dozen tribes and city-states throughout the Yucatan Peninsula, modern day Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. At the time of the Spanish conquest, the Aztec empire dominated central Mexico, stretched to the Pacific Ocean to the West and the Gulf of Mexico to the East and as far south as present day El Salvador. It was the largest Empire of Pre-Hispanic time. In 1502, Moctezuma II (also known as Montezuma) became Emperor of the Aztecs and ruled from Tenochtitlan, their capital city. The Aztecs had a warrior society which practiced human sacrifices and had virtually enslaved other tribes and cultures including the Maya and the Zapotecs.

Malinali's father was an Aztec Lord (or "Tlatoani") who died when she was young. Her position in her society allowed her to have an education and contributed to what the Conquistadors would later call a "noble bearing". Her mother was minor nobility and later remarried and had a son with her new husband. Her own mother sold Malinali into slavery in order to ensure that her young son could take over the family estates. Her mother then told the family that Malinali had died. Malinali would pass from owner to owner and eventually become the possession of a nobleman who lived in what is now the Mexican state of Tabasco. Her mother's actions would have profound repercussions upon the Aztec empire.

Malinali had several important attributes. She had a unique gift for languages and spoke Nahtuatl, the language of Moctezuma and the Aztecs, the Maya language, and several other Indian dialects. By all accounts, she learned Spanish in a matter of weeks. She had an understanding of the power politics and cultures within the Aztec Empire. This knowledge was extremely important since there were a number of conquered tribes throughout Mexico who had no love of the Aztecs. It was this hatred that Cortes used to help develop a strategy that the Spanish utilized in their conquest of Mexico.

In 1519, Hernando Cortes and a group of approximately 530 Spanish Conquistadors arrived in Mexico and landed near what is now Vera Cruz. Despite the multiple efforts of Diego Velasquez, the Governor of Cuba, to recall Cortes from his expedition, Cortes continued his advance into the Aztec Empire. He either killed or, through bribery, incorporated the men sent by Velasquez into his army.

After several battles, Cortes and his small army won a significant victory in the battle of Centla in Tabasco. The defeated Tabascan noblemen gave twenty women to Cortes as a gift. One of these women was Malinali. According to the Spaniards, she was in her late teens or early twenties at the time. She was subsequently baptized by the Spanish and given a new name, Marina. She became Cortes' mistress, chief translator, and strategist. She would later be known among the Spanish as Dona (or "Lady") Marina. Many historians do not consider her responsible for the success of the Spanish Conquest. However, she provided critical information in identifying tribes who could serve as allies or those who had to be defeated in battle.

She was able to guide Cortes in understanding the psychology of the people he encountered, thus aiding in the building the myth that he was either Quetzalcoatl, the Aztec's god, or had been sent by Quetzalcoatl. According to Aztec mythology, Quetzalcoatl was the inventor of medicine, agriculture, and astronomy, who had left their lands by sea and vowed to someday return to the Empire. This ruse was aided by the Spaniard's technology which included cannon, harquebuses, armor and Calvary. None of this technology had ever been seen by the Aztecs. Moctezuma was never certain whether the Spaniards were gods or mere men who could be slain at will. As a result, he did not mobilize the military might of the Empire until it was too late. Through trickery, bribery and intimidation, Cortes was able to move deeper into the heart of the Aztec empire. Cortes' advancement was aided by Malinali who conducted his negotiations, prevented his defeats, and never showed fear in the face of their mutual enemies. Cortes himself would write "After God, we owe this conquest of New Spain to Doña Marina." As noted by Bernal Diaz del Castillo, one of Cortes' Conquistadors,

"Let us leave this and say how Dona 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 later battles, and knew that all of us were wounded and sick, yet never allowed us to see any sign of fear in her.”

Malinali was instrumental in developing the alliance between the Spanish and the Tlaxcalans, one of the most important of Cortes' allies in his conquest of the Aztec Empire. After the fall of Tenochtitlan, the Aztec's capital and the site of the future Mexico City in 1521, she settled in Coyoacán, a small town eight miles south of Tenochtitlan. From 1521-1524, Cortes ruled Mexico as a Governor and Captain General. He initiated the rebuilding of Tenochtitlan into Mexico City and spent the next seven years of his life alternatively establishing peace and conquering the tribes of southern Mexico. Malinali accompanied Cortes on expeditions to crush rebellions in Honduras in 1524-1526.

Malinali's life after the fall of the Aztec Empire is surrounded by myth and legends. Cortes was married to Catalina Suarez before his conquest of the Aztec empire. Despite popular myth, historians acknowledge that Cortes enjoyed multiple mistresses during his time in Mexico including Isabel, a daughter of Moctezuma, Francisca, the sister of an Indian chieftain, and a woman named Inez. In addition, he had two Spanish mistresses, Leonor Pizarro and Antonia Hermosillo, both of whom vanished shortly after Catalina's arrival in Mexico.

Malinali and Cortes had a son whom they named Don Martin Cortes in 1522. It was during this time period that Catalina was brought from Cuba to be reunited with her husband. Shortly after Catalina's arrival, Malinali became a companion to Juan Jaramillo, a Spanish nobleman. They eventually were married in the town of Ostotitepec in the province of Nogales and had a daughter. Cortes attended the wedding and ultimately gave Malinali estates at Jilotepec as well as land which had once been owned by Moctezuma, the last Emperor of the Aztecs. Catalina would later die under mysterious circumstances leading many to believe that Cortes had murdered her or had arranged to have her killed. Martin, Malinali's son, eventually became a Knight of the Order of Santiago and fought for Spain in Algeria and Germany before dying in Spain's campaigns against the Moors.

King Charles I, the Spanish King, was eager to curb Cortes' lust for power. He established a royal Court in Mexico and placed Antonio de Mendoza as its first Viceroy. Cortes and his followers were given encomiendas, or grants of ownership and control over lands, labor and produce. The Spanish began to mine for gold and silver and soon a river of precious metal flowed across the Atlantic into Spanish coffers, thus helping secure Spain's position as a world power. Cortes would continue to alternate between conquering new territories for Spain and battling intrigue among his countrymen. He eventually died on December 2, 1547.

According to historian Hugh Thomas, Malinali died in Spain in 1551. After the Mexican revolution in the 1820s, legend made her into La Malinche, the traitor, or La Llorona (the "weeper"), a ghostly figure with wind-blown hair and a torn dress who forever wanders the night grieving for the lost children of the people that she betrayed.

Depending upon the viewpoint of the historian, Malinali is regarded as a victim, the ultimate betrayer of her own people, the mother of modern Mexico, or even the first Mexican Feminist. What cannot be denied is that she was instrumental in the conquest of the Aztec Empire.

Sources: Jerome R. Adams, *Latin American Heroes, Liberators and Patriots from 1500 to the Present* (Ballantine Books, 1991); Himilce Novas, *Everything You Need to Know about Latino History* (Penguin Books, 1994); Alan Riding, *Distant Neighbors: A Portrait of the Mexicans* (Vintage Books, 1989); Ramon Eduardo Ruiz, *Triumphs and Tragedy, A History of the Mexican People* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1992); Hugh Thomas, *Conquest: Montezuma, Cortes and the Fall of Old Mexico* (Simon & Schuster, 1993).

