

# Tlaxcala Under Spanish Rule

By Taylor Marshall

Over the course of the five centuries that have elapsed since the Spanish conquest of Mexico, a myth of desolation has been propagated by literature and scholarship regarding the ensuing fate of the natives of Central Mexico. This myth of native desolation determines that “the Conquest left in its wake a silence that was immense, terrifying. It engulfed the Indian world...reduced it to a void. Those Indigenous cultures, living, diverse, heirs to knowledge and myths as ancient as the history of man, in the span of one generation were sentenced and reduced to dust, to ash.”[1] With the primary retelling of the story of the 16th century conquest and its after effects originating from the Spanish perspective the myth of native desolation may have appeared to be true. However, contemporary native-language based research on this topic suggests otherwise. One central Mexican native group in particular authored a written record, the Lienzo de Tlaxcala, that tells a different story. The Tlaxcalan people of central Mexico, indigenous allies of Cortez during the conquest, successfully referenced that pact to adapt to the new Spanish social system while they strove to maintain their unique culture, history, language, and traditions long after the conquest.

Early in Hernan Cortez’s expedition into the Mexican interior, his detachment of men came across an abandoned wall on the outskirts of the province of Tlaxcala. Upon further movement into Tlaxcalan territory they were attacked by Tlaxcalan troops and fought vigorously with the indigenous warriors before the native army was forced to retreat in defeat under the onslaught of Spanish cavalry and superior weaponry. The Spanish had heard from a messenger of the Tlaxcalan resistance to the Aztec empire and that the natives sought to barter an alliance against Tenochtitlan. Cortez himself describes Tlaxcala as “a very extensive province called Tlaxcala, which they informed me was near this place, as it proved to be. I had also been informed by them that the natives of this province were their allies, but deadly enemies of Moctezuma; and they desired me to form an alliance with them, because they were a numerous and powerful nation.”[2] After much debate within the altepetl council as to whether Tlaxcala should continue fighting Cortez and his men, or accept an alliance and join Cortez’s forces in an attempt to topple the Aztec Emperor Moctezuma, the Lords of Tlaxcala finally decided upon uniting with the Spanish. Tlaxcala then joined thousands of its warriors to Cortez’s cause as well as an abundance of food, porters to carry the Spaniards goods, and guides for the long march to the capital of the Mexica Empire. The remaining parts of

the story of the Spanish-Tlaxcalan alliance entail the Spanish-Tlaxcalan capture of Tenochtitlan followed by the eventual conquest of the Mexica Empire's land holdings as well as much more territory beyond its borders. These events involving the Tlaxcalans and their pact with Cortez's conquistadors are the basis of Tlaxcalan expectation of an elevated status in post conquest Spanish colonial society.

The Tlaxcalan altepetl council utilized their alliance with Cortez during the conquest to effectively lobby the Spanish crown for corporate privileges and elevated status within colonial Mexico. This attempt at influencing King Charles V is evidenced by the fact that around the year 1552 the city government of Tlaxcala decided upon the rendering of the Lienzo de Tlaxcala, an epic painting in the native pictograph style depicting the history of Tlaxcalan alliance with the Spanish.

*Figure 1: Tlaxcalan coat of arms taken from the Lienzo de Tlaxcala (Chavero, Alfredo. "Introduction to the Lienzo de Tlaxcala." Mesolore: A research & teaching tool on Mesoamerica. Accessed October 19, 2017.*

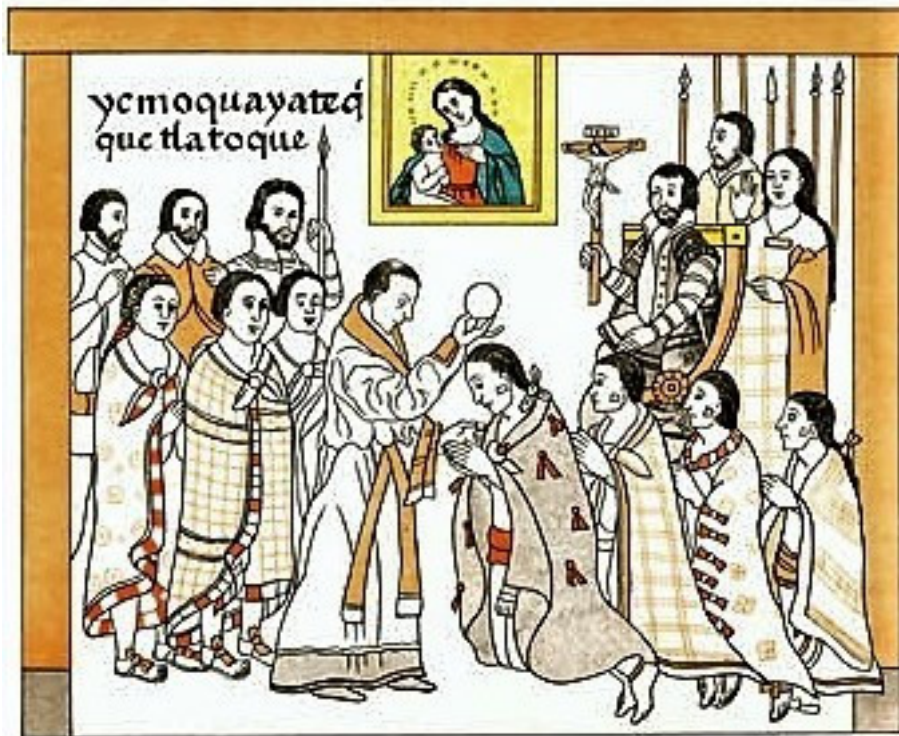
This effort was described in the June 17, 1552 minutes of the town council of Tlaxcala from the Tlaxcalan Actas:

*1. The cabildo discusses sending a delegation to Spain to lay Tlaxcala's troubles before the emperor; contributions from all Tlaxcalans are to pay expenses of travel and solicitors' and counsel's fees, etc., since city assets are insufficient. The viceroy's approval is to be asked by a committee of an alcalde and two regidores sent to Mexico City...*

*4. A painting of Cortes's arrival in Tlaxcala and the war and conquest is to be prepared for presentation to the emperor; two regidores are to oversee the project and arrange for artists' supplies through the city majordomo and to choose the artists. At this point it is not decided whether the painting should be on cloth (tilmatly) or paper (amatl).[3]*

The painting then was to be sent to King Charles V to demonstrate the massive amount of aid given to Cortez by Tlaxcala and in doing so to lobby the king for more preferential treatment in addition to the rewards that had been secured by the city after the conquest. The coat of arms depicted at the top of the painting is a primary example of the indigenous retaining their own identity and ethnic heritage as their local mountain peak, today known as La Malinche, and the city state's political organization as well as its ruling families are prominently featured on their own emblem just below the Spanish royal family's crest.

The Tlaxcalans were making rational calculated decisions to advance their own interests even during the conquest years that run contrary to the traditional notion that their society simply collapsed and ceased to exist. Tlaxcala entered into an alliance with Cortez after fighting against him for about two weeks as they realized the possibilities of toppling the Mexica empire and seeking the best possible outcome for themselves thence forward. They also understood that converting to Catholicism was part of making a pact with the Spanish.



*Figure 2: The conversion of the Tlaxcalans to Christianity from the Lienzo de Tlaxcala (Chavero, Alfredo. "Introduction to the Lienzo de Tlaxcala." Mesolore: A research & teaching tool on Mesoamerica. Accessed October 19, 2017.*

This level of strategic initiative does not fall into correlation with the narrative that the natives were destitute and anemic. In a blatant contradiction of the myth of native desolation the Tlaxcalan people acted methodically in their own interests and threw massive amounts of resources and lives behind the support of their new Spanish allies in the hopes that their gamble would pay worthwhile dividends at the conclusion of the war.

In the decades and centuries following the installation of Spanish rule in Mexico and the implementation of the Spanish social order the Tlaxcalan people their ancestors to gain economic and socially advantageous positions in colonial Mexico. Peter Villella's article on the Salazars of colonial Tlaxcala highlights one noble Tlaxcalan family's utilization of their city's elevated status to secure prominent careers for many generations. Peter Villella's analysis of the Salazar family's history determines that "the Salazars avoided the twin fates of Hispanization and impoverishment by relying heavily for their prestige, honor, and status on their Tlaxcalan heritage." [4] The family

preserved documentation of their ancestral roots thereby maintaining their cultural integrity while ensuring the family's continued prosperity in the new social order. A few notable sons of the family achieved grados or degrees from local universities which in turn unlocked further prestige for the family and successive generations. The patriarch of the family, Tececeptzin, achieved the honorary title of Don after his election to the governorship of the Quiahuiztlan cabildo which was then transmitted to his heirs and on down the line of succession indefinitely.

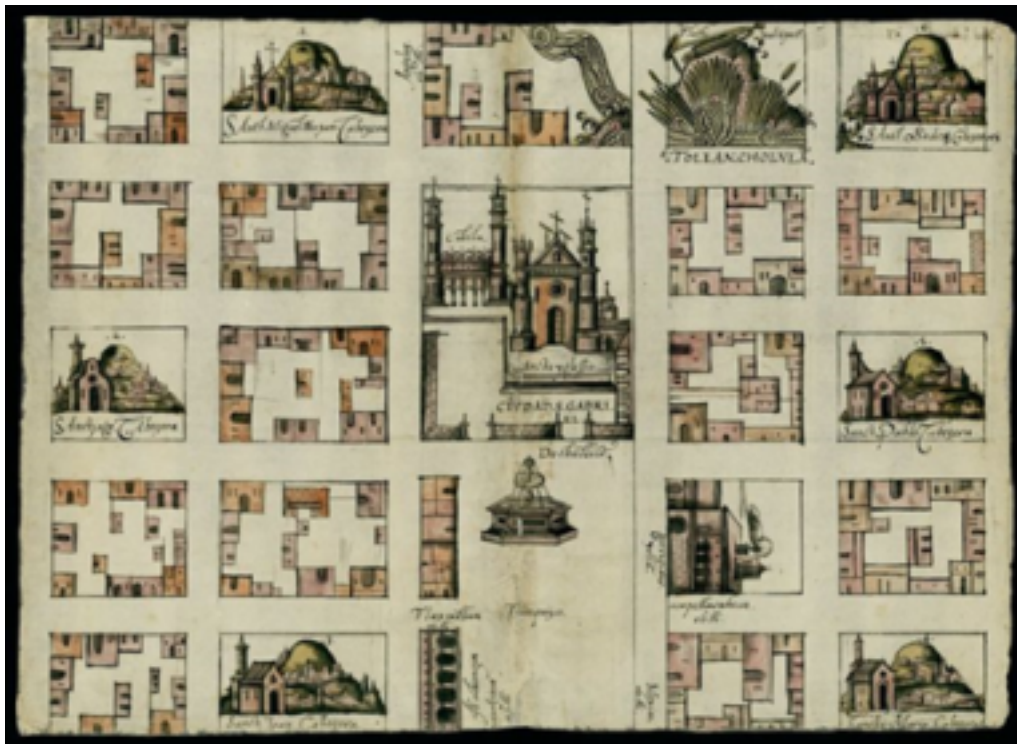
Many generations after the conquest, a son of the Salazar family was accepted into the clergy and in doing so enabled successive male members of the lineage to enter the brotherhood of the cloth if they so desired. Probably the most prominent and famous member of the family was Don Manuel de los Santos y Salazar whose writings on philosophy and religious thought were in service to the church. His literary achievements were at the height of the intellectual and philosophical thought of the day and can be viewed even today at museums such as the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. The Salazar family in particular was able to leverage its ancestor's alliance with the Spanish to gain access to an upper tier of the Spanish social order, all while maintaining ties to their specific indigenous cultural history that predated their new surroundings.

Native members of elite post conquest Mexican society earnestly sought to maintain links to their cultural inheritance. Indian writers began to aggrandize their culture and dictate its history in an effort to preserve their social identity for generations to come. Copyist and writer don Domingo de San Anton Munon Chimalpahin Quauhtlehuanitzin transcribed numerous indigenous works into Spanish and many Spanish chronicles into Nahuatl over the course of his lifetime. He wrote grand histories of several altepetls and celebrated indigenous Mexican culture as unique and important as a means of showcasing his ancestors' way of life for future generations. His total transcribed works total more than 1800 pages and he is one of the only known indigenous writers of the alphabetic Nahuatl language to sign his work as his own. "Chimalpahin once described Mexico's first peoples, the Teochichimeca of Aztlan, as a most robust, wise, warlike people. They were the forebears of the glorious Mexica state and the history that he was so keen to preserve." [5]

Like Chimalpahin, there are colonial indigenous writers who perceived the story of the conquest quite differently from the Spanish and sought to alter the narrative with their own voices in representation of an indigenous view of the conquest. Don Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl in his numerous literary chronicles explains the native perspective of the conquest and its aftermath

while asserting native Mexican control over their own history. According to Peter Villela “this sort of directed assault at the base of Spanish historical remembrance by Ixtlilxochitl is the type of substantive evidence that warrants a total dejection of the myth of native desolation that Matthew Restall brought to the attention of history.[6]

Spanish colonialism did not inherently disrupt indigenous social stratification, so that numerous integral aspects of the native social identity continued unabated after the conquest. According to the Tlaxcalan Actas the town councils were set up to parallel the existing power structure in the Alteptl.



*Figure 3: Indigenous map of Cholula showing Spanish grid pattern influence (Relaciones Geográficas at the Benson Collection. Accessed December 1, 2017.*

Native lords, even some who fought against the Spanish during the conquest, remained in power afterwards and essentially governed in the same fashion they had before. “From the Spanish point of view, mid-century Indian government was a most practical and economical institution; it maintained itself without expense to the royal treasury; it required the presence of only a few Spanish officials; it preserved local order; it handled all the details of tribute exactments; it came rarely into conflict with Spanish authority.”[7] Numerous prominent Spanish subjects of indigenous traditions were able to

call on their indigenous lordship heritage as reference even if the noted ancestor was from before the Spanish arrival as the Spanish system retained the existing social hierarchy. The maintenance of the community hierarchy within colonial Mexican indigenous societies allowed some natives to retain this aspect of their culture and therefore continue the legacy of their former civilization and its people.

Much has been forgotten about the illustrious history of the indigenous peoples of Central Mexico in the wake of the Spanish conquest and colonization of their homeland. Only recently has the tireless lobbying campaign for recognition and expanded corporate privileges on the part of the Tlaxcalan people been displayed in full for academic viewership. Many indigenous historians have contributed to an expansion of the history of the Spanish conquest and in doing so properly elevated their ancestors' significant contributions to the cause while celebrating their remarkable native culture. The fact that there are in Mexico today millions of indigenous language speakers continuing to live in their ancestral lands is emblematic of the idea that Restall's myth of desolation is truly a myth. The accumulation of Tlaxcalan actions in securing dispensation for their people and the insertion of indigenous perspectives into history by numerous native Mexican authors should permanently dispel the notion that indigenous Mexican culture and society collapsed following the Spanish conquest.

## **End Notes**

[1] Restall, Matthew. *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003:102.

[2] Cortez, Hernan. *Letters from Mexico*. Edited by Anthony Pagden. New York: Grossman Publishers, 1971:49.

[3] Anderson, Arthur J.O., Frances F. Berdan, and James Lockhart. *The Tlaxcalan Actas: A Compendium of the Records of the Cabildo of Tlaxcala, 1545-1627*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1986:51.

[4] Villella, Peter B. "Indian Lords, Hispanic Gentleman: The Salazars of Colonial Tlaxcala." *The Americas* 69, no. 1 (July 2012): 1-36.

[5] Schroeder, Susan. *The Conquest All Over Again: Nahuas and Zapotecs Thinking, Writing, and Painting Spanish Colonialism*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2011:117.



[6] Villella, Peter B. "Indian Lords, Hispanic Gentleman: The Salazars of Colonial Tlaxcala." *The Americas* 69, no. 1 (July 2012):1-36.

[7] Gibson, Charles. *Tlaxcala in the 16th Century*. New Haven: Conn., 1952:123

## **Works Cited**

### **Primary Sources**

Castillo, Bernal Diaz Del. 2009. *The History of the Conquest of New Spain*. Edited by David Carrasco. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Chavero, Alfredo. n.d. "Introduction to the Lienzo de Tlaxcala." *Mesolore: A research & teaching tool on Mesoamerica*. Brown University. Accessed October 19, 2017.

Cortes, Hernan. 1971. *Letters from Mexico*. Edited by Anthony Pagden. New York: Grossman Publishers.

James Lockheart, Frances Berdan, Arthur J. O. Anderson. 1986. *The Tlaxcalan Actas: A Compendium of the Records of the Cabildo of Tlaxcala, 1545-1627*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.

### **Secondary Sources**

Gibson, Charles. 1952. *Tlaxcala in the 16th Century*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Gillespie, Jeanna. 2004. *Saints and Warriors: Tlaxcalan Perspectives on the Conquest of Tenochtitlan*. New Orleans: Univ. Press South.

Lockheart, James. 2004. *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico*. Eugene, Or: Wipf & Stock.

Restall, Matthew. 2003. *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Schroeder, Susan. 2011. *The Conquest All Over Again: Nahuas and Zapotecs Thinking, Writing, and Painting Spanish Colonialism*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press.

Villella, Peter B. 2012. "Indian Lords, Hispanic Gentlemen: The Salazars of Colonial Tlaxcala." *The Americas*, July: 1-36.