

INDIAN LANGUAGES DURING THE COLONIAL PERIOD

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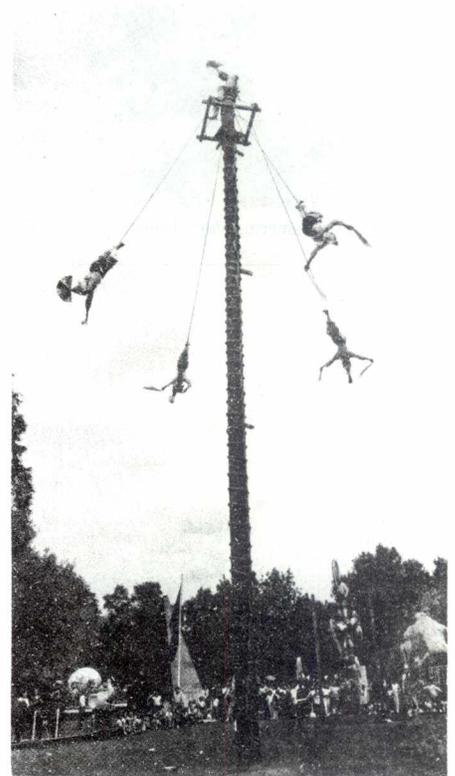
1992 will mark the commemoration of the fifth centenary of the Spanish Conquest of America. For some, this event must be called the "encounter of two worlds", for others, it was the beginning of the "fusion of two cultures". In a strict sense, both these ideas are true, but it cannot be forgotten that the Conquest was a process which resulted in the extinction or near-extinction of many Indian customs. Anthropologist Dora Pellicer examines the problem of the Mexican Indians' languages, which, especially in their written form, were substituted by Spanish following the Conquest. Finally, Omar Ocampo presents an account of recent governmental moves to protect the rights of Indian peoples.

Within today's debate regarding languages of prehispanic origin which, along with Spanish, make up the country's linguistic panorama, there appears to be an absence of reflection concerning the development of written Indian languages both prior to and after the Conquest. Ignoring this aspect has led to the mistaken notion that bilingual rural schools can be the only contemporary space reserved for written versions of our native tongues.

It seems that we forget, firstly, that the great civilizations of ancient Mesoamerica (Olmecs, Zapotecs, Mexicas, and Mayas) had already initiated, before the Christian era, a process of written language construction. Secondly, upon the arrival of the Spaniards, the local cultures had ideographical and phonetical systems capable of registering important aspects of Indian life in codexes which are still conserved. Thirdly, throughout the colonial period these codexes were

employed to assist in the transmission of Catholic dogma, as can be seen, for example, in the case of the Mazahua Catechism which was prepared in the 16th century and named in memory of Jacobo de Testera, a monk and missionary who was one of the first to take advantage of the existing codexes to further his task of evangelization. Finally, ever since the Conquest, the indigenous population was gradually dispossessed of the right to develop its own writing, which, on all but a very few occasions, was put to serve the ideological domination of the Mesoamerican peoples.

The first known examples of indigenous writing can be traced back to the number systems and hieroglyphs of the Olmec and Zapotec cultures, which were followed by the Teotihuacan graphic notation. The most advanced systems were doubtless those of the Maya and Nahuatl societies. Maya hieroglyphs, whose most ancient examples can be found on the stelae at Tikal in Guatemala, are still a challenge to their descipherers, and texts transcribed so far constitute but a very small fragment of the knowledge which this society came to develop, and which



Pre-colombian flying ritual still practised in Veracruz and Puebla. Photo by Marco Antonio Cruz / *Imagenlatina*

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was mentioned by brother Diego de Landa in his *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán* (Relation of the Things of Yucatan):

"...the sciences taught [by the Maya priests] included the count of the years, months and days, festivals and ceremonies, the administration of their sacraments, fatal days and times, means of divination, remedies for their ills, their history, and reading and writing with its letters and characters [...] with figures which represented writing".

The Mayas' textual works were written in a number of languages which evinced an undeniable cultural unity. The Maya-Quiché culture's *Popol Vuh* is possibly the most studied example, along with the books of *Chilam-Balam*, written in the Mayan Yucatan after the Conquest.

The Nahuatl writing system turned out to be less cryptic for its researchers, and has provided abundant information regarding this civilization, which counted with *Tlacuilos*, the scribes of the empire, who were charged with providing a graphic account of the main happenings of the day. This written system, Georges Baudot has pointed out, if unable to register spoken language completely, allowed the writers to provide an account of events and ideas.

At the time of the Conquest, Maya and Nahuatl writing was no longer limited to inscriptions on wood or



Figure engraving from Monte Albán. Photo by Alejandra Novoa

stone, but rather had come to appear in forms and materials which were recognized by the Europeans as books. Due to this, Bernal Díaz del Castillo would be able to report in his *Historia Verdadera de la Nueva España* (True History of the New Spain), the discovery in the Aztecs' houses of "little books made of *amate*, the paper they made from the bark of trees, where they wrote the signs concerning the time and past events", whilst Diego de Landa, in the text mentioned above, noticed that

"...they wrote their books on a long page folded over which came to be enclosed between two boards which adorned the whole, and were written on one and another part in columns, according to the folds...".

Conquest and Destruction

Unfortunately these books, better known as codexes, were mostly destroyed or lost in the violence unleashed by the Conquest. Some of this destruction was caused by the Indians themselves, seeking either to preserve their past or to settle quarrels with Indian enemies; much was caused by the Spaniards, who saw in these codexes vestiges of infidel practices. None the less, specialists have conducted recent research on the preservation of sixteen codexes, product of the labors of prehispanic scribes.

It is important to keep in mind that written texts do not register the full rich-

ness of the cultured modalities employed in the oral transmission of Mesoamerican poetry, literature and oratory. The marked differentiation of social functions in the most advanced and stratified Indian societies had led to the conformation of linguistic forms with special prestige, to be employed during religious rituals as well as in civic and social ceremonies. In the Nahuatl world, mastery in the use of language was practised in the *Cuicacalli*, institutions of which Baudot tells us that they "covered the basic function of transmitting and elaborating the cultured tongue, or *Tecpillatolli*, an elegant tongue for lords and priests, clearly differentiated from the *Macehualtolli*, the language of the working people". These cultivated styles generated great admiration amongst those who learned Maya, Zapotec, and especially Nahuatl, due to the refinement of their rhetorical figures. These were referred to by the Franciscan priest Bernardino de Sahagún in his *Historia General de las Cosas de la Nueva España* (General History of the Things of New Spain) in the following terms:

"The prayers of the priests [who] use beautiful metaphors and forms of speech [...] This is the rhetoric of the Mexican people where there are many curious aspects concerning the beauties of their speech [...] In the answer made by an old principal, wise in the art of good speaking, answering on behalf of his people...".



Doors within doors, Monte Albán. Photo by Alejandra Novoa

Indeed, a great number of different cultural forms were developed by the lettered Indian classes, such as lyric and epic poetry and a historical narrative prose whose graphic transcription was, at least for the Maya and Nahuatl societies, an object of extreme care which demanded the attention of specialized scribes. The oral transmission of this literary activity was considered an aspect of the people's education, and in this respect was an element of cohesion and identity within Indian societies.

In their encounter with multiple indigenous groups, in their travels through the vast territory between upper California and Costa Rica, the Spaniards gradually came upon great diversity in terms of cultural forms, from the nomadic societies of the north and east to the powerful empires of the central high plateau and the southeast. All of them were linked to different languages whose exact number at that time is difficult to establish. Nonetheless, Mauricio Swadesh's 1958 classification postulated the presence of 143 different languages in the lands which Hernán Cortés was to baptize

with the name of New Spain. Each one posed a challenge to colonization, as they corresponded not only to different forms of communication, but also to different outlooks and world views, different ways and means of ordering beliefs and social behavior.

The priests, representatives and executors of the political and religious projects of the Spanish Crown, responded to the challenge of the complex Mesoamerican world with ethnographic curiosity and doctrinal zeal. Some priests, with the help of the cultured Indian classes, brought forth what history we do know about the pre-hispanic past, a history fatally filtered through the preconceptions and prejudices which underlaid the Europeans' interpretation of the Indians. The Conquest resulted in the imposition of the Christian creed, overcoming the challenge of cultural diversity. But the writing of Indian languages was of fundamental importance to the priests' labors, although it was an activity which paradoxically served disparate intentions. The chronicles, memoirs, and histories were a response to the Spanish Crown's need to be in-

formed about its new subjects, and the amazement and thirst for knowledge which the Amerindian's costumes, rites and traditions aroused. The sermons, confessionaries, doctrines, catechisms and prayers pursued the destruction of the beliefs and pagan liturgies which were omnipresent in the cultures so admired by certain priests.

The chronicles of the Indies, recovered along with a great deal of poetry and oral literature, are due to the work of nobles and Indian principals who, together with Franciscan, Dominican, Augustinian and Jesuit missionaries who arrived to the New Spain between 1523 and 1572, collected tales and codexes. These were transcribed into the Latin alphabet, which the Indian scribes picked up apparently without effort, according to observations of the priest Motolinia in his *Memoriales de las Cosas de la Nueva España* (Memoirs of the Things of New Spain): "...they quickly learned to write [...] In but a few days of their beginning to write they could do every task set by their teachers..."

The central part in this work of recovery and transcription was carried

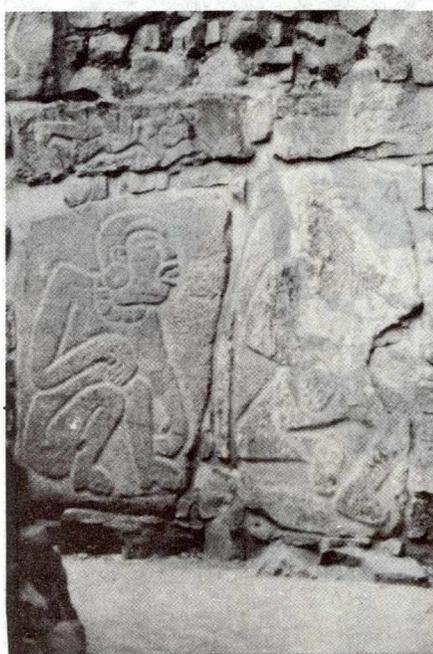


Children participate in the flying ritual. Photo by Marco Antonio Cruz/Imagenlatina

out in the 16th and beginnings of the 17th centuries, a period which saw the work of *mestizo* scribes such as Hernando Alvarado Tezozomoc and Fernando de Alba Ixtlixochitl. Nonetheless, the historian José Joaquín Blanco reminds us that teaching the profuse relationships of the prehispanic world was prohibited, and in many cases, literature referring to them was destroyed, being considered heretical and subversive by peninsular censors. In these conditions, literature about the Conquest became gradually submerged by colonial religious writings which gave birth to hundreds of texts on or about Indian languages.

Religious Use of Indian Languages

Christian penetration of the Amerindian world of New Spain did not respond to the unity of language and religion instituted by Ferdinand the Catholic in his Law of the Indies of 1512. The process of evangelization in New Spain had, at least, in as much as language was concerned, a series of complex and haphazard determinative factors. Crown policy at the same time prohibited the use of native tongues (as was ordered by Charles III and Charles IV) but encouraged their use for religious conversions (as was the policy of Phillip II, Phillip III and Phillip IV); on the other hand, the Church did not maintain a unified and sustained linguistic policy of Castilianization. Rather, many parish priests found that their interests were favoured by learn-



ing Indian tongues, as this allowed them to maintain their balance of power against clerical newcomers, who, arriving from the Iberian peninsula, did not understand such languages. Because of this, evangelization was strictly tied to a lexical and grammatical knowledge of Indian languages, with the purpose of easing the evangelizing task. Texts known as "Arts and Vocabularies" were produced for priests, such as the *Arte del Idioma Otomí* (Art of the Otomi Language, in which can be found rules, conjugations, verbs, christian doctrine, prayers, confessionaries, administrative means, reprimands and weddings), published anonymously in 1755; or the *Arte Doctrinal y Formas de Aprender la Lengua Matlalzinga* (Doctrinal Art and Means to Learn the Matlalzinga Tongue) for the administration of the holy sacraments and all other things necessary to speak it in an ordinary manner), written by brother Miguel de Guevara in 1638.

Knowledge of Indian languages was followed by the production of works for the propagation of religious creeds; and it was these two currents which determined the new policy for writing in these languages which was to serve brother Vicente Villanueva in creating his *Misterios del Rosario en Verso Dramático Zapoteco* (Mysteries of the Rosary in Zapotec Dramatic Verse), and brother Francisco Torralba to produce his *Sermones de dominicas y santos* (Sermons of dominicans and saints to preach to the indians every day in clear and elegant Maya or Yucatecan tongue); there was also the priest Nájera Yanguas, with his *Doctrina y enseñanza en lengua Mazahua* (Doctrine and teaching in Mazahua tongue of many useful things for ministers of the doctrine and for those who naturally speak Mazahua), and dozens more.

According to the exhaustive bibliography produced by Irma Contreras García in 1935, the colonial period witnessed the production of 51 Arts of the Nahuatl tongue and 152 texts for evangelization in this language; 17 studies on Maya and Yucatecan and 11 religious works in this tongue; 17 Arts and Vocabularies and 22 texts for evangelization in Zapotec; 10 sermons and catechisms in Mixtec, as well as 6 studies about this language; 17 grammatical and lexical studies accompanied by 13 doctrines in Otomí, and other writings of the day in 43 further languages. All this confirms the observation made by the 19th century



philologist brother Manuel Crisóstomo Nájera: "Not a tongue is spoken in the territory known as New Spain that does not possess its grammar, a more or less extensive dictionary, and its catechism, even if these have not been published".

This great number of prints and manuscripts contributed to the greater diffusion of the precepts of the church, which meant that Indian languages acquired a new importance, without gaining, however, a status of equality with Latin or Spanish. In fact, the religious structures which took over regulation of the writing of Mesoamerican languages distanced themselves totally from the cultural repertoire of Indian oral tradition. Once the church had settled into New Spain, and affirmed its functions within the regime of the Spanish viceroys, the appreciation and respect that some of the first missionaries displayed towards Indian customs and their creators diminished notably. In their preface to the *Compendio del Arte de la Lengua Mexicana* (Compendium of the Art of the Mexican Tongue), the writers, Jesuit priests Horacio Carocho and Ignacio Paredes, stated that their intention was to "...cultivate and instruct the Mexican language to those who, following the calling from God, wish to use it in the glorious and apostolic task of ministering to the ignorant, squalid and extremely needy Indians...".

This leaves us in no doubt that by the 18th century the clergy no longer professed an interest, and much less an admiration, for the cultures of the Indians who, isolated and exploited under the viceroy's governments, were seen as little more than an object for religious conversion.

Luis Fernando Lara, in an article which appeared in 1983, has stated that the conquerors not only imposed a new language, but also a new conception of the world. I dare to add another imposition, that of religious writing, which introduced profound changes in the social functions and contents of the Indians' mother tongues. Words, metaphors and other figures of speech were given new meanings and were forcefully employed in the service of translations of Our Fathers, *Salve Reginas* and other Christian rituals. In this way, the first *Cartilla* of the 16th century, attributed to Pedro de Gante, pretended to alphabetize with teachings of prayers in Latin, Spanish and Nahuatl: *Izcatqui Ycuepa Yn Pater Noster*, which means Our Father in the Mexican Tongue.

Expropriated from their cultural contexts, these idioms were ruled over by the norms of the ecclesiastic officers. Thus, brother Juan Bautista, in the preface to his *Sermonario en Lengua Mexicana* (*Sermonary in the Mexican Tongue*), thanked the help and advice provided by the Indian nobles of the College of Santiago Tlatelolco, although he also made it clear that it was his criteria which would provide the definite decisions as to how the Indian languages were to transmit Christian precepts: "...Esteban Bravo, natural from Tezococo, [...] helped me with this work. He spoke such good Latin, and translated anything from Romance or Latin into the Mexican tongue with such wealth and multitude of figures that many admired him, and some even payed him well, although I was not convinced by such an abundance of copy,

and have edited whatever seemed superfluous in the things of his language".

The transcription of Indian languages into the Latin alphabet also had to submit to the criteria that the peninsular and criollo priests set for spelling and pronunciation: "This tongue is to be written in the letters of the Spanish alphabet, although seven letters are missing, namely b, d, f, g, r, s and j...".

This is the first line from the *Compendio del Arte de la Lengua Mexicana* (*Compendium of the Art of the Mexican Tongue*) mentioned above, whose authors also established many rules for writing this language: "...There are in this tongue five vowels, a, e, i, o, u; but the o is sometimes so closed, obscure, that it seems more like a y; but

it does not cease to be an o. Therefore, I determine not to write *Teutl* but *Teotl* (God) or not to write *ichpuchtli* but *ichpochtli* (maiden)".

Finally, the fact that only a small minority of the Indians learned to read, and an even smaller minority to write (these skills were considered separate at the time, and were taught separately), contributed to alienate and distance the Indian language speakers from the decisions taken as to how to write their languages. This came about because, except for the few schools for Indians which operated in the 16th century (catalogued by Gómez Cañedo in a publication in 1982), the reign of the viceroys was characterized by its complete negligence of education, a situa-





tion which was denounced in an extensive Pastoral from the Archbishop Lorenzana y Buitron towards the end of the 18th century. By this time, in the whole country, there existed only 10 schools officially destined for the Indians' education. Consequently, the vast majority of them simply became recipients of religious policies translated into their languages. Their submission and lack of alphabetization prevented them from participating creatively in the process of writing their own languages, because they were given no opportunity to do so.

Anchored in the expectations of colonialism, the task of the Church, far from contributing to the enrichment of Mesoamerican languages, forced them to translate the imperial ideology of Catholicism. The priests' linguistic labors pivoted on the need to evangelize, fatally linked to the need to destroy the thoughts and world views of the Indians. This situation allowed the Spaniards to appropriate the native languages and to impose a new form of writing, alien to the Indians' historical and cultural contexts and concepts. In these conditions, the introduction of an alphabet was used to exorcise the past and to dispossess the Indians from the right to write their own mother tongues. ■