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DOÑA MARINA, INTERPRETER AND CULTURAL INTERMEDIARY

Indian princess and slave, both celebrated and maligned, Doña Marina (a.k.a. Malintzin or la Malinche) is one of the most illustrious-and controversial-interpreters to have served European conquerors of the so-called New World.

Doña Marina left no written record of her own life. Her story was woven into the worst chronicles of the Conquest. Since then it has been told and retold in many different, sometimes conflicting, ways. She appears in myth, fiction and song; a volcano even bears the name Malinche. In recent years, Marina has been re-examined by scholars seeking to provide fresh insights and draw new conclusions from her intercultural experience.

She is acknowledged very little by Cortés himself in his five letters home to Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. He mentions her by name only once and in another letter refers to her simply as the "Indian woman." She appears more frequently in two chronicles written later in the sixteenth century: the *True History of the Conquest of New Spain* by Bernal Díaz del Castillo, one of Cortés's men, and the *General History of Things of New Spain* (known as the *Florentine Codex*) compiled by Friar Bernardino de Sahagún using native eyewitnesses and professional bards. Marina has been represented in varying ways from very early on. She is featured, along with Cortés, in illustrations of the *Florentine Codex*, and even more prominently in the Lienzo de Tlaxcala, an Indian picture history painted under Spanish influence around 1550.

The saga and myth of la Malinche

She was born around 1505 of noble lineage. Her father, who was a chief of the province of Coatzacoalcos, died when she was a child. When her mother remarried and bore her new husband a son, Marina was given away to traders from a Maya-speaking coastal town farther to the east. When Cortés sailed from Cuba and reached the Tabasco Coast, the Maya inhabitants sent food, cloth and twenty women slaves to appease him. Cortés had the twenty women baptized and then presented them as gifts to his captains.

Marina was baptized along with the other women in March 1519. She soon stood out for her beauty and intelligence. As a child of noble parents, she had probably received an education. She spoke Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs from whom she descended, and Maya because she had lived among the Tabascans.

Initially, Marina was given to Alonso Hernández Puertocarrero, an important gentleman. When Puertocarrero returned to Spain, Marina became Cortés's mistress and in 1522 bore him a son. Cortés later married her off to Juan Jaramillo. In 1526, she bore Jaramillo a daughter, baptized María.

We do not know exactly how or when she died. Much later, her daughter Doña María Jaramillo testified in court that her mother had died in 1527, the year after the daughter was born. According to another tradition, Marina had a long and prosperous life. She is said to have accompanied Jaramillo to Spain and to have been a celebrity at the Spanish court. This is most likely a mistake, possibly arising from a confusion with another woman.

Her work

When Cortés arrived in Tabasco, his interpreter was Jerónimo de Aguilar, a Spanish shipwreck survivor who had been enslaved by the Yucatecan Maya. Cortés sailed west along the Gulf coast and found

himself in Nahuatl-speaking territory. Since Aguilar's knowledge was limited to Maya, Marina was put to work mediating between the inhabitants and Aguilar. Aguilar conveyed to her what Cortés wished to say and she repeated this in Nahuatl.

As Marina followed Cortés on his gruelling journeys to Montezuma's empire at Tenochtitlán (modern-day Mexico City) and later to Honduras, she learned Spanish. She was not the only interpreter-the chronicles refer to a Spanish boy called Ortegulla who interpreted for Montezuma. But she gradually eclipsed Aguilar and outshone all the others. She also interpreted for the friars and taught others to interpret.

Uniformly depicted as reliable, sociable, good-natured and intelligent, Marina bridged linguistic and cultural gaps between vastly different peoples. She was not merely Cortés's interpreter; she was also his concubine and adviser. She informed on spies and exposed conspiracies, and helped persuade her fellow Indians not to resist the Spaniards. At the meeting of Montezuma and Cortés, for example, Marina is described by Díaz del Castillo as "very clever," and is reported to have addressed the Aztec emperor in this way: "Señor Montezuma, what I *counsel* you...." Her role is perceived to be one of translator and mediator. No wonder she is held to be one of the key players in the contact between European and Indian worlds.

[Quality control?](#)

The quality of Doña Marina's interpretation has been a matter of speculation. How could she have learned Spanish well enough to translate in both directions in just a few months, at most two years? It has been suggested that communication was made easier by the fact that Marina was repeating memorized speeches with quite definite rhetorical or stylistic devices.

We will never know exactly how she managed, since there were no witnesses who knew all the languages in question. And yet there is a

general consensus that she was an intelligent and effective communicator. But is it even appropriate to try to measure her performance against contemporary professional standards?

An ambiguous figure

Marina remains an ambiguous figure, indicted in post-independence Mexico as the mother of a bastard race of *mestizos* and a traitor to her people. This accusation is anachronistic, however. Mexican Indians of her time did not make up a homogeneous single entity that she could have betrayed. Instead, she came from a smaller community which was not on particularly good terms with the diverse peoples she encountered on her journeys with Cortés.

Feminist historians have portrayed Doña Marina in a more favourable light, showing that she had little choice and few rewards for her many talents and her part in the extraordinary events of the Conquest. Handed from one culture to another throughout her life and treated as disposable property, she was actually in an ideal position to contribute to the exchange of cultural values. And so, she comes to be viewed not so much as a traitor, but as an intermediary, a herald of the culturally hybrid societies of the future.

What's in a name?

The different versions of Marina's name are a reflection of her "in-between" status and ambiguous position. Christened Marina, she was given the title Doña by the Spaniards out of respect for her nobility, although none of Cortés's men-or even he, for that matter-was referred to as Don. The Indians gave her the name Malintzin, derived from Marina (the sound r being unknown to the Mexicans, who imitated it with l), to which was added the suffix -tzin, which, like Doña, signified rank or nobility. She enjoyed the unique distinction of having her own name used also for her master: the Indians began to refer to Cortés

himself by the name Malintzin, which the Spaniards turned into Malinche.

According to one tradition, her name in Nahuatl was Malinalli Tenépal. Father Olmedo, the priest who baptized her, is credited with having the linguistic sensitivity to choose a Spanish name that resembled her original one. Malinalli was thought to be a name given to her at birth, for the day of the calendar on which she was born. The family name, Tenépal, is meant to denote her unusual abilities as a speaker and linguist. This is now considered to have been an error, probably resulting from a back translation into Nahuatl of Doña Marina la lengua (Marina the "tongue" or interpreter).

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