

Malinche (Doña Marina)

Person: Malinche (Doña Marina)

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Description The Mexica woman known variously as Doña Marina, Malinal, Malintzin, and, most commonly, Malinche, served as translator and mistress to Hernán Cortés during his 1519-1521 conquest of the Mexica empire for Spain. The details of her biography are sketchy and disputed; she was born in the Coatzacoalco region, likely between 1500 and 1505. Spanish chroniclers report her parents were wealthy nobles, but she was sold into slavery as a child, ending up in Potonchan (now Tabasco). On 15 March 1519, the Mayans of Potonchan delivered her with nineteen other women to Cortés as a peace offering; the Spaniards immediately baptised her Marina. Fluent in both lordly Nahuatl (the language of the Mexica ruling class) and Chontal Maya (a dialect understood by Cortés' Spanish translator), she became a linguistic link between the conquistadors and the Mexica. Malinche's knowledge of Indigenous politics and culture helped Cortés secure important alliances with discontented tribes in the Mexica empire. In 1522, after the Mexica capitulation, she bore Cortés a son, Martín. During the ill-fated Honduras expedition of 1524-1526, Cortés married her to the Spanish soldier Juan Jaramillo, with whom she had a daughter, Maria. Her date of death is uncertain; estimates based on letters and legal records range from 1527 to 1552.

Malinche has become a contested symbol in Mexican culture; her ambiguous biography has been rewritten to serve the agendas of politicians, artists, anthropologists, and historians. To the conquistadors, she was Doña Marina, a great lady courageously helping to bring Christianity to her people (as depicted in Bernal Díaz de Castillo's *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*). During the rise of Mexican nationalism over the nineteenth century, Malinche became the Mexican Eve. This nationalist archetype portrays her as both the mother of Mexico (Martín, as one of the first mestizos, is symbolically the first Mexican), and the great traitoress, who betrayed her people politically, by serving the conquistadors, and sexually, by becoming a mistress of foreigners. In some contexts, she is blamed for her victimhood, and labelled La Chingada (the Raped One), who passively submits to the foreigner and brings forth his children in shame. Contrasted with the Virgin of Guadalupe, she is the archetypal bad woman, the terrible mother; in Mexican myth, she is conflated with Cihuacoatl, Mexica goddess of women who died in childbirth, and with La Llorona, the Weeping Woman, who killed her own children. More recently, feminists have attempted to reimagine Malinche, stressing her alienation from "her people" due to slavery, and her survivor's skills of adapting and gaining limited power in the constraints of her circumstances.

The question of Malinche's personal autonomy, or alternately, the degree of her complicity in the Conquest, is the crucial debate of her story. Observing her status as captive and slave, some biographers view her as a helpless victim forced to submit to stay alive. Others, with admiration or contempt, assign her a more active role in shaping events. Since the historical record does not preserve her own views, Malinche's options and motivations remain difficult to deduce.

As a participant in an early mixing of cultures, Malinche presents fundamental problems of loyalty and identity that resurface in the current context of globalization. To what extent is embracing the foreign a betrayal of one's homeland, and to what extent is such an embrace voluntary? Some Mexicans view US-led globalization as a new attempt at Conquest, and "malinchista," a term evolving from "Malinche," has come to mean "one who is corrupted by foreign influences" or "one who loves foreign things," especially where the foreign influence is American. Her complicated history and the dilemma she faced illustrate the difficulty of negotiating the interfaces between cultures.

Suggested
Reading:

Baudot, Georges. 2001. Malintzin. In *The Oxford encyclopaedia of MesoAmerican cultures*. ed. David Carrasco, 156-8. Toronto: Oxford University Press.

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The American Historical Association website. *Malinche — Indian princess or slavish whore?*, www.theaha.org/tl/LessonPlans/ca/Fitch/malinche.html (accessed 16 August 2005)

Van Delden, Maarten. 2004. Past and present in Victor Hugo Rascón Banda's "La Malinche" and Marisol Martín del Campo's "Amor y conquista". *South Central Review, Special Issue: Memory and Nation in Contemporary Mexico* 21 (3): 8-23.