

Meditations On Bernal Diaz

History, Publishing, and the Make-Believe

by Mick Arellano



Aztec warriors (The Florentine Codex, page IX, F, 5v)

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Mexico in 1847 (*General Records of the U.S. Government RG11*)

16th Century Spanish Document Found

SAO PAULO (AP) – A missing page of “The Conquest of New Spain” by Bernal Diaz del Castillo was reportedly found in Brazil last week.

In Sunday’s edition of the Sao Paulo newspaper O Globo, the curator of the Brazilian National Archives in Rio de Janeiro explained how he came upon the treasure.

“Why it was here, I do not know,” said the old librarian dressed in white. “I was moving bundles of 16th century documents from one room to another when a page fell to my feet. It was in an antiquated Castilian hand, so I made a copy and sent the original to Spain.”

The document is now being examined by experts at the Biblioteca Nacional in Madrid, but it is believed to be authentic.

The Associated Press obtained a copy of the page, and was able to produce the following English language translation.

“It was the custom of the natives of this town to bathe in the shallow waters of the bay at sunset. Many of us watching from the ships were tempted to join them, especially after Aguilar called out to some of the Indian women and laughed. But an equal number of us turned away in embarrassment. A storm was building in the west. Clouds rising above the distant shore were forming astonishing shapes. Several clouds suddenly came together in the shape of a very tall woman who was similar in appearance to the figures we had seen in the local temples. But then the shape of the woman became more defined, and she seemed to us like an angel. When I saw the face of the angel and her outstretched arms, I fell to my knees, knowing that God had overcome the power of the idols and was sanctifying our journey with the appearance of the blessed Virgin.”

There is no page number or manuscript mark on the handwritten folio, but it appears to fit into the discussion of Punta de las Mujeres at the beginning of the Hernan Cortes chronicle, when the ships are laying over near Cozumel.

Even if the document is authenticated by experts at the Biblioteca Nacional, scholars will still need to decide if the page was lost or intentionally omitted from the historical narrative. But omitted by whom?

Diaz was critical of competing chroniclers who exaggerated the facts of the Cortes expedition, yet he himself is known to have omitted information that did not fit his purposes. It is possible that the newly discovered passage was discarded by the author himself because of its sexually suggestive content.

1492 and the Kingdom of Granada

Just a few years before Columbus sailed the ocean blue, Spain was two separate countries. The Crown of Aragon, centered in Barcelona, had a Mediterranean empire that once stretched from eastern Spain to Italy and Greece, while the Kingdom of Castile, centered in the middle of the Iberian peninsula, was linked to the Atlantic at the major southern port cities of Cadiz and Seville.

Elsewhere on the peninsula was the Kingdom of Portugal in the west, the Basque redoubts in the far north, and the Muslim Kingdom of Granada in the southeast.

The Kingdom of Granada was the last of several Islamic political entities on the Iberian peninsula, a fertile ground where Islamic kingdoms had thrived for over seven hundred years. But when the two increasingly powerful Christian kingdoms of Aragon and Castile were united by the marriage of Ferdinand and Isabel, creating the modern nation-state of Spain, the long history of Muslim political entities quickly came to an end.

The year 1492, in fact, is famous in Spanish history for three reasons—the expulsion of Spanish Jews from España, the defeat of the last Muslim kingdom on the Iberian peninsula, and the discovery of the New World by Columbus. By the 16th century, Catholic Spain had the biggest empire on Earth, stretching from the Philippines in the Far East to the expanses of North, Central, and South America to all of Hapsburg Europe and the Mediterranean.

Curiously, the Kingdom of Granada had been retained as a rich client state after the 13th century Christian Reconquest, but by the late 15th century it had become a political embarrassment to the Catholic Monarchs. The result was the great war of Granada, which saw the last Muslim stronghold vanquished.

The Spanish Muslims of Granada were the final representatives of an exotic native culture that was several centuries old, but they were no match for the world's preeminent Christian superpower and the expansionist forces that were about to conquer the New World.

After their defeat, when the king and queen of Granada were making their escape through the mountains on their way to North Africa, the king stopped for a last look back at his Iberian homeland. In Spanish history, this moment is called the Last Sigh of the Moor. “It is good that you weep like a woman,” said his wife, “for what you could not defend like a man.”

Castilan, Castilan!

The language known today as Spanish is really the Castilian language. Despite the merger of Aragon and Castile in the late 15th century, the New World was always a Castilian enterprise, peopled mostly by adventurous Castilians. Thus the Castilian language came to the Americas instead of the Catalan language, just as the Baroque came to the New World because it was the standard at the time. As Castile continued to grow in power, its

language even came to dominate on the Iberian peninsula, eventually reducing Catalan to the status of a regional language. Today, there are three languages spoken in Spain—Castilian, Catalan, and Basque. Castilian is the national language, while Catalan is spoken in the Barcelona area and the Balearic Islands. The Basque language, a pre-Indo-European language dating to the Bronze Age, is still spoken in the Basque Provinces.

It is interesting to read in **THE CONQUEST OF NEW SPAIN** by Bernal Diaz del Castillo that the conquistadors thought of themselves first and foremost as Castilians and only secondarily as Spaniards. A captured Spaniard from a previous expedition who had since gone native gave Mayan descendents on the Yucatan peninsula inside information about the best way to attack the foreign invaders. This information became first hand knowledge of local chiefs, so much so that when the Spanish forces finally arrived they were greeted by calls of “Castilan, Castilan!”

Some famous historians have rested their entire careers on the argument that the people of Spain developed a collective self-consciousness as Spaniards well before the 16th century, but the Diaz chronicle seems to call that thesis into question. On the other hand, as Diaz himself suggests, it was easy to be Castilian and Spanish at the same time.

Of course, conquistadors is a rather harsh term to use for a loose band of noblemen and commoners who were away from home for the first time. The quest for wealth and social advancement motivated these adventurers much in the same way that the Crusades had earlier motivated other European adventurers. Unfortunately, negative associations with both episodes dominate history, leaving little room for forgiveness.

“It has been three years since I walked with you and your mother through the streets of Merida in Extremadura,” wrote Miguel Luna de Orellana, a self-proclaimed member of the Cortes expedition, “and I still have nothing of value to show for this adventure. The trip across our fair land to the great port cities of the south was arduous, but nothing compared to the endless journey across the Western Sea. The fact that I survived the voyage at all and reached the West Indies in good health is a tribute to God and his Infinite Mercy. I am now without a peso, however, and live in Havana by the favor of others. But I have recently joined an expeditionary force whose Captain has promised me a small encomienda of Indians if we succeed in establishing settlements in the land to the west of us. Our Captain is named

Cortes, and he too is from fair Extremadura, but I must admit that I had never heard of him before agreeing to this expedition.

“By all accounts, the Indians of this land to the west do not want us to settle there. They are a hostile people who resisted two earlier expeditions, and they are a strange and idolatrous people who wear body tattoos and practice human sacrifice. In battle they whistle and yelp like wild animals and so hope to frighten civilized people into retreat. Together with the mosquitoes, bats, and giant lizards, the strangeness of it all makes me yearn for home.

“Yet the colors draw me closer to this place. Even on the shores of Havana the water is a shade of blue I have never seen before. And the birds here are different than I am accustomed to, like the air itself. One of the officers said he planted an orange tree somewhere on the new land to the west during a previous expedition, so I hope to visit the tree and see how it fares.”

There is no record apart from this one that lists Miguel Luna de Orellana as a member of the Cortes expedition. Research into the authenticity of the above letter is complicated by the fact that the Castilian surname Orellana has many variations, including the Castilian surname Arellano. A similarly named conquistador, Tristan de Luna y Arellano, is known to have led an expedition to Florida some forty years later.

So I Told Him...

Primary and secondary sources in history show that in late ancient Spain the Roman Church spent a lot of time and energy trying to suppress the various pagan rites and rituals that still flourished on the Iberian peninsula. The task of obliterating paganism was almost impossible in the countryside, however, and some of the cities didn't quickly capitulate either. Documents report one particular All Hallows Eve in Seville, for example, when urbane young men were seen running through the streets of the city wearing freshly cut stag heads on their upper quarters and nothing at all on their lower quarters.

In a reputedly less recalcitrant time, Cortes and his Spanish conquistadors invaded Mexico. What his party found there, among other things, were the folding books of the Aztecs and Mayas. These folding books were printed on bark paper that was far superior to papyrus, and the words and pictures in these folding books spoke of the history of two civilizations.

The Spaniards burned them. Only a handful of the folding books survived the flames, by accident or intention. Cortes himself is thought to have sent two Maya folding books to Charles, the King of Spain and the Holy Roman Emperor. Today those Maya folding books are known as the Dresden Codex and the Madrid Codex. The Dresden Codex contains most of what scholars understand about Mayan astronomy.

One of the perpetrators of this dark episode in human history was Bishop Diego de Landa, who reportedly searched the Yucatan for Mayan folding books to burn. Soon thereafter, Church leaders tried to salvage some of the damage by recreating parts of the folding books in Spanish, but the corpus of the Aztecs and Mayas was mostly gone.

Obliteration successful.

While sitting alone in the Tozzer Library at Harvard University's Peabody Museum one wintry afternoon, a scholar noticed an antique-looking piece of paper fall out of the folding book he was studying. On the piece of paper was a note written in Spanish, which the scholar examined and later put back into the folder from which it had fallen. The note read as follows:

“So I told him: ‘Please don’t act too quickly, Your Grace. The Mexican folding books are art, but the Yucatan folding books are intellectual. They have stature, and they are trying to tell us something. Two thirds of each page is filled with writing, and only one third of each page is filled with art. The scribes who wrote these folding books clearly had a language, and they were obviously expressing something that was very important to them.’ His Grace listened to me attentively, but with a stern countenance, and then he gave an approving nod. ‘Your point is well taken,’ he said. ‘The folding books will be burned, for all the reasons you have stated.’ ”

Mexico: The Florentine Codex

The Florentine Codex (so called because it is housed in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence) is the Aztec version of Mexican history to the Spanish invasion. Also known as “Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva Espana,” a twelve volume encyclopedia of all things Aztec compiled by Fray Bernadino de Sahagun of the Franciscan Order, this late 16th century

codex annotates Aztec culture in three different languages: Nahuatl (Aztec), Castilian, and Latin. Called into question by modern scholars because of its Church patronage, yet praised for its erudition and scope, it is today the standard source of information for the study of Aztec life before the Spanish Conquest.

The Florentine Codex was an inspired attempt to recreate the Aztec folding books that had been destroyed by less tolerant religious leaders soon after the Spanish Conquest. It was a belated attempt to salvage information that might otherwise have been lost forever, and it was one of the most romantic episodes in human history. Trilingual Aztec princes were at the center of this immense effort, and the scholarly work done over several decades puts one in mind of earlier linguists who worked at the famous schools of translators in medieval Baghdad, where much of ancient Greek thought—which was at risk of being lost—was translated into Syriac and Arabic and transmitted to the west through Spain. Curiously, the main body of the Islamic Church in medieval Spain didn't appreciate ancient Greek thought anymore than the main body of the Catholic Church in the New World appreciated Aztec ways. At times in history, however, individuals have made a difference, as was the case with Averroes in Muslim Spain and Fray Bernadino de Sahagun in the New World. Much of what we know about Aristotle and Plato we owe to the commentaries of Averroes, but what can we learn from the Aztecs?

Of immediate interest to students of history is a native rendering of the Spanish Conquest that corroborates the work of Bernal Diaz but presents a different perspective and a different writing style. Here the Spaniards are entering Tenochtitlan:

Then they set out in this direction, about to enter Mexico here. Then they all dressed and equipped themselves for war. They girded themselves, tying their battle gear lightly on themselves and then on their horses. Then they arranged themselves in rows, files, ranks. Four horsemen came ahead, going first, staying ahead, leading. They kept turning about as they went, facing people, looking this way and that, looking sideways, gazing everywhere between the houses, examining things, looking up at the roofs. Also the dogs, their dogs, came ahead, sniffing at things and constantly panting.

For others, there is the rest of the Florentine Codex—the grand things and the minutia of a twelve volume cultural biography. The abiding philosophy

of the elders, the ways for ordinary people to live a good life, and the many secrets of nature. In this tiny passage from Book 11, for example, algae at Lake Texcoco is being gathered so it can be made into loaves for eating. “Tecuitlati” or spirulina has since been proven to be a highly nutritious dietary supplement.



Bernal Diaz In His Own Words

Fantasy literature was in vogue in Spain during the era of the New World Conquest. Known today as “literature of enchantment,” this popular genre had elements of the chivalric and the picaresque and was best represented early on by **AMADIS DE GAUL**, a tale made famous in Castile. The genre later reached its culmination with the publication of **DON QUIXOTE**, Europe’s first great novel. Interestingly, New World place-names were often lifted directly from books that were very much in the minds of Spanish explorers. In the

literature of the time, for example, “California” was the name of a fabulous enchanted island. Questions of fantasy and reality in fact characterized the Spanish Conquest from the beginning. New World natives had never seen horses before the Conquest, so at first they thought that a man on a horse was one animal. As for the Spaniards, the New World was a revelation to them, so much so that they often thought they were dreaming. And ultimately, suggested Bernal Diaz, maybe they were.

Here the Spaniards are approaching Tenochtitlan.

Next morning, we came to a broad causeway and continued our march toward Iztapalapa. And when we saw all those villages and cities built in the water, and other great towns on dry land, and that straight and level causeway leading to Mexico, we were astounded. These great towns and cues and buildings rising from the water, all made of stone, seemed like an enchanted vision from the tale of Amadis. Indeed, some of our soldiers asked whether it was not all a dream. It is not surprising therefore that I should write in this vein. It was all so wonderful that I do not know how to describe this first glimpse of things never heard of, seen, or dreamed of before.

When we arrived near Iztapalapa we beheld the splendor of other caciques who came out to meet us, the lord of that city whose name was Cuitlahuac, and the lord of Culucan, both of them close relations to Montezuma. And when we entered the city of Iztapalapa, the sight of the palaces in which they lodged us! They were very spacious and well built, of magnificent stone, cedar wood, and wood of other sweet smelling trees, with great rooms and courts, which were a wonderful sight, and all covered with awnings of woven cotton.

When we had taken a good look at all this, we went to the orchard and garden, which was a marvelous place both to see and walk in. I was never tired of noticing the diversity of trees and the various scents given off by each, and the paths choked with roses and other flowers, and the many local fruit trees and rose bushes, and the pond of fresh water. Another remarkable thing was that large canoes could come into the garden from the lake, through a channel they had cut, and their crews did not have to disembark. Everything was shining with lime and decorated with different kinds of stonework and paintings which were a marvel to gaze on. Then there were birds of many breeds and varieties which came to the pond. I say again that I stood looking at it, and thought that no land like it would ever be discovered in the whole world, because at that time Peru was neither known nor thought of. But today all that I then saw is overthrown and destroyed. Nothing is left standing.

Bernal Diaz wrote his chronicle in the 1560s, four decades after the events described in the above passage.

Acts of Omission

When a historian researches primary and secondary sources for an article or book, he or she immediately omits a myriad of data that do not match his or her interests, so much so the final product of that research might in fact rest on a tiny fraction of the material consulted. And when the same material is examined by more than one historian, the results of that research can vary according to the purpose and background of each historian, so much so that students of history often claim that there are as many histories as there are historians. The type of history pursued (political, social, economic, etc), the politics of the writer (liberal or conservative), and even national identity can create biases that come into play when a scholar writes an article or book.

A good case in point occurred in the mid-20th century in Europe when two famous historians—Raymond Carr and Salvador Madriaga—wrote similarly large books on The Second Republic and Civil War in Spain. On the surface, the authors themselves seemed very similar. Both were contemporary to the events that they wrote about, and both were political centrists. But Carr was right of center politically and British, while Madriaga was left of center and Spanish. The result were two wildly different accounts of events leading to the Civil War, so much so that reading the two books is almost like reading historical accounts of two different events. At about the same time, Gerald Brenan wrote a social history of events leading to the Civil War, which reads like a wonderfully long footnote to the whole affair, and seems as different as day is to night when compared to the political accounts of Carr and Madriaga.

Even primary source historical narratives have limited objectivity because their authors were vulnerable to the same biases that affect the researchers who study them. Bernal Diaz, for example, in his **CONQUEST OF NEW SPAIN**, definitely had political points to make in his first-hand account of the Spanish Conquest, and his history suffers from many of the biases that his modern critics decry. But the big picture is that he wrote an account that was grand enough and reliable enough to survive the centuries. It is in fact his modern critics who should be careful of their own too obvious biases. By

not putting his work into European historical context, they are intentionally omitting useful information. And by trying to counter European centrism with Mesoamerican centrism, they are guilty of the same cultural bias that they accuse Diaz of harboring.

Here is some of what the critics won't tell you. Spain at the time of the Conquest was the Christian standard-bearer in Europe and the most powerful military force on the continent. Charles, King of Spain, was also the Holy Roman Emperor who ruled most of Christian Europe. During the 16th century, it was Spain that defended Europe against the Ottoman Empire in battles that decided the fate of the west. Miguel de Cervantes, the author of **DON QUIXOTE**, lost an arm at Lepanto in what he later described as the greatest naval battle of all time. Last but not least was the coincidence of events in 1492, when the fall of Muslim Granada to Spanish Christian forces coincided with the discovery of the New World. Political and religious momentum thus made the Spanish conquest of the New World almost inevitable.

Diaz wrote his history in part to counter the false or exaggerated accounts of the Cortes expedition, which in some cases had been written by authors who hadn't even been to the New World, much less participated in the Conquest. So it is particularly ironic to learn that his full account of things in Mexico has not actually been available to English language readers. His five-volume history was translated into English in 1908, three hundred years after it was published in Spain, and a severe abridgment was published in 1928. It is the English language abridgment, with huge omissions in fact, that is in print today.

An abridgment in the publishing world is a massive stylistic rewrite whereby the translator picks and chooses what text to include and what text to delete. Text omitted is often considered "beyond the scope of this translation," and the end result is a new creation in the style of the translator. The first English language translation of Diaz's narrative (Keatinge 1800) was an abridgment. Recent translations such as Cohen (1963) are also abridgments. Maudslay (1908, 1928) is still considered the authoritative English translation.

According to Hugh Thomas, the original 1632 Spanish edition had been tampered with, making the 1904 cleaned up edition (Garcia) and the 1908 English translation (Maudslay) the authoritative texts.

English Accent

The so-called Black Legend was a propaganda campaign begun by Spain's chief international competitor about a century after the conquest of Mexico. The foundation of the campaign was the mistreatment of New World natives by conquistadors and settlers. Its purpose was to justify raids by Elizabethan employed pirates against Spanish treasure ships returning to Europe from the New World. According to the propaganda campaign, Spaniards had a heart of darkness, while the English were bright and squeaky clean. The campaign worked. Plundering the plunderers became a legitimate business, and the Spanish character was forever called into question. Spain developed a great armada of warships to protect its treasure fleets, but defending its reputation was another matter. When Spain finally fell from grace and lost its empire to independence movements and wars of annexation, there was no international day of mourning. By the 20th century, in fact, nobody seemed to care that the once supreme imperial power had devolved into a Third World country.

It was probably no coincidence, therefore, that the relatively fair-minded history authored by Bernal Diaz was not translated into English until 1800, nearly three hundred years after the conquest of Mexico, while much more inflammatory Spanish chronicles passed into English hands centuries earlier. Anti-Spanish publications written by Bartolome de las Casas, for example, were widely translated throughout Europe during the 16th century. Curiously, scholars say that Elizabethan English and the Castilian of Cervantes shared many similarities, and were much closer in structure and pronunciation than English and Spanish are today. (Yet even now, speakers of theatrical English roll their r's and affect Latin sounding vowels.) Word very likely got around 17th century England that the Diaz narrative was the most accurate of all the Conquest chronicles, but no English translation of his work was published until the turn of the 19th century, when a flurry of Diaz translations flooded Europe.

Translations are interesting in themselves because the person doing a first translation into any specific language is putting black on white, while the person doing a subsequent translation has a previous authority to rely on. Here are two English translations of two sentences from Diaz's preface to **THE CONQUEST OF NEW SPAIN**. The first is by Maudsley (1908, 1928), the first translator to work with the cleaned up version (Garcia 1904) of the

original manuscript, and the only scholar to translate all five volumes of Diaz, and the second is by Cohen (1963), a more recent translator who found Maudslay's style ungainly.

“I have observed that the most celebrated chroniclers, before they begin to write their histories, first set forth a Prologue and Preface with the argument expressed in lofty rhetoric in order to give luster and repute to their statements, so that the studious readers who peruse them may partake of their melody and flavor. But I, being no Latin scholar, dare not venture on such a preamble or prologue....” (Maudslay)

“I have observed that before beginning to write their histories, the most famous chroniclers compose a prologue in exalted language, in order to give luster and repute to their narrative, and to whet the curious reader's appetite. But I, being no scholar, dare not attempt any such preface.” (Cohen)

The Cohen translation reads better and may be what Diaz meant, but the Maudslay translation is no doubt closer to what Diaz actually said.

In the Maudslay translation, Genaro Garcia described his efforts, both bibliographic and political, to acquire and publish the original manuscript without the three hundred year old edits that corrupted the 1632 edition. He also spoke to the larger problem of authenticity in the long history of publishing. Friar Alonso Remon, who published the first Spanish edition of **THE CONQUEST OF NEW SPAIN**, “suppressed whole pages of the manuscript, interpolated others, garbled the facts, changed the names of persons and places, increased or lessened the numbers, modified the style, and modernized the orthography, moved thereto either by religious fervor and false patriotism, or by personal sympathy and vile literary taste. As all the later editions, and all the translations without exception, were copied from the first edition published by Remon, it results that in reality we do not know the **TRUE HISTORY**.”

The long version of the book title has always been **THE TRUE HISTORY OF THE CONQUEST OF NEW SPAIN**.

Select Bibliography

In the introduction to his book, Cohen (1963) used the unavailability of Maudslay (1908) as partial justification for his new translation of Diaz's **THE CONQUEST OF NEW SPAIN**. "It is complete and fully documented," he said, but it is "to be found only in a few libraries."

Cohen made no mention of the Maudslay abridgement (1928), which is still in print today, but his point is well taken. The availability of scholarly resources in history, even at university libraries, is a serious problem, as any modern researcher can tell you. As a result, scholars often turn to the best used book stores and rare book dealers for the materials necessary to build private working libraries. The activity of book collecting is in fact one of the most rewarding by-products of scholarly research. It sometimes uncovers major or minor treasure, and it always gives the researcher a welcomed break from the tedium of reading and writing.

A very recent development in scholarly book collecting is the advent of online book dealers who cater mainly to university libraries. These dealers list their books on Internet websites and often ask hefty prices for their hard-to-find titles. Out of range of most individual collectors, it is nevertheless gratifying to know that these pricey titles still exist in the open marketplace.

Here is the listing on abebooks.com, a clearinghouse for rare book dealers worldwide, for Keatinge (1800) and Maudslay (1908).

[The True History of the Conquest of Mexico. By... One of the Conquerors. Written in the Year 1568. Translated from the Original Spanish by Maurice Keatinge.](#)
DIAZ DEL CASTILLO, Captain Bernal.

Quantity: 1

Price: US\$ 1676.58

Meditations On Bernal Diaz: History, Publishing, and the Make-Believe

Book Description: London., 1800. First English edition, 4to, viii, 514 pp. Map frontispiece of Mexico City, minor marginal worming to the lower corners of the first 14 leaves. Uncut and recently rebound in half morocco, marbled sides, gilt spine with a black label, a very good copy. The Author sailed to Cuba in 1514 and was part of the group who first explored the Yucatan peninsula. He subsequently took part in the numerous battles that eventually defeated the Aztec empire, being made Governor of what is now Antigua in Guatemala as a reward. Not published in his lifetime, a manuscript was discovered in Madrid in the following century. An important firsthand account. Bookseller Inventory # 13925

[The true history of the conquest of New Spain ... from the only exact copy made of the original manuscript. Edited and published in Mexico by Genaro Garcia. Translated into English, with introduction and notes, by Alfred Percival Maudslay.](#)
DIAZ del CASTILLO, Bernal

Quantity: 1

Price: US\$ 1910.00

Book Description: Hakluyt Society, London -16., 1908. First edition. 5 volumes, 8vo., including portfolio of 12 maps with booklet, 7 folding maps in pockets at rear of vols., other illustrations and maps throughout, some folding, some illustrations coloured, original blue cloth gilt, spines slightly darkened, light wear, labels to spines, very good set. Hakluyt Society second series, XXIII, XXIV, XXV, XXX, XL. Bookseller Inventory # 67019

How Writers Write

When Bernal Diaz wrote his book, he did not sit down one day and begin writing his history in chronological order. Neither did he begin by outlining the entire five volume dissertation and then going back to painstakingly fill in all the parts. Instead, he began by writing down the first experiences that came to mind, regardless of when those experiences actually happened in the New World, and regardless of where they might fit into a future, developed story. He then continued to write down more and more of his experiences, working day and night, certainly for months and possibly for years, until he had accumulated a huge pile of notes and sketches. This is the first stage in writing—building a library of notes and sketches for the author to consider, categorize, and possibly incorporate into narrative format. Only after sifting through and reading all of his notes and sketches did Diaz begin the task of writing his history, armed now with a huge inventory of notes and sketches to help him design and construct his narrative. After piecing it all together

into a first draft, he then added more data and more experiences that came to mind, until he had a second draft. And so the process continued, long and arduous, until, eventually, he had a final draft or manuscript.

The process of writing a primary source narrative is in fact very similar to the process of writing a secondary source narrative. While the author of a secondary source begins his work by researching and writing notes on that research, the author of a primary source begins his work by searching his memory for mental notes to write out in visible form. Both then develop their notes into narrative sketches, and only after organizing those sketches do they begin the task of piecing those sketches together into a much longer narrative format called a first draft.

Interestingly, novelists employ much the same process as the primary source author and secondary source author, except that novelists have the freedom to arrange their sketches in any fashion they desire, whereas the authors of primary source works and secondary source works are more scientific and cannot take such artistic liberty.

Curiously, it is here, at the stage where the author decides which narrative sketches to include in his narrative, and where to include them, that Bernal Diaz may have deleted the short sketch only recently found in Brazil (see **16th CENTURY SPANISH DOCUMENT FOUND**). On the other hand, Friar Alonso Remon, who published Diaz's book in Madrid decades later, also had ample opportunity to reject the page in question for reasons of his own—but if Remon was responsible, the passage should have reappeared in the Garcia edition (see **ENGLISH ACCENT**).

Bernal Diaz quit his huge project for a time, due to the enormity of the task and his own sense of inadequacy, but the exaggerations and inaccuracies of competing chroniclers motivated him to continue. The most difficult writing challenge at this point for Diaz was to not be overwhelmed by the mammoth structure he had created and that still needed to be reinforced and refined—all the while trying to exert some control over a manuscript that seemed to have taken on a life of its own, with no conclusion in sight.

This is the point in fact where many would-be books fail because their authors are not equal to the task at hand in terms of time and energy. This dreaded encounter with the monster of one's own making is also the reason why most authors forego the masterpiece and instead confine themselves to

smaller, more manageable writing projects. Many a study is littered with the corpses of failed manuscripts, whose parts lay scattered in file cabinets and cardboard boxes, and whose final rendering will never see the light of day.

Yet Diaz persevered and succeeded, even in old age. His publisher later corrupted his completed manuscript, various translators later criticized his writing skills, and modern critics later accused him of intolerable cultural bias. But to hell with them, I say. He finished his grand project, and I for one am damn proud of him.

Footnotes

Footnotes are detailed bits of information that for one reason or another did not get woven into the narrative. The information in a footnote is usually so important that the author felt compelled to include it anyway, as a note at the bottom of the page or as a note at the end of a chapter or article. In a history book, footnotes and endnotes are often very extensive, so much so that they sometimes become a book within a book. For a student of history, there is hardly anything more fun, or revealing, than reading a scholarly footnote.

Introductions to historical works are similarly interesting because the author of the introduction is forced to evaluate his own narrative or the narrative of another scholar, and inevitably something new comes to light, if only in bits and pieces. The introduction can also offer a history of the history book and provide any variety of information that creates a fuller picture for the reader who might then draw other connections.

In the introduction to his 1904 edition of **THE CONQUEST OF NEW SPAIN**, Genaro Garcia points out that contemporary historians already knew of Diaz's completed manuscript even before it was published. "Antonio de Herrera quotes it frequently [in a book published in Madrid 1601], Friar Juan de Torquemada also refers to it on several occasions [in a book published in Madrid 1615], and the Licentiate Antonio de Leon Pinelo devotes some lines to it in his brief bibliography [Madrid 1629]."

Garcia also points out that the original manuscript which he published was found in Guatemala, where Diaz took residence after the Conquest. It was a copy of that original which had been sent to Spain in the 16th century where

it was published in Madrid in 1632 by Friar Alonso Remon who corrupted some of the text.

Thus when Garcia published the original Guatemalan version in 1904, it had been three hundred years since news of the Remon version began circulating in Spain.

Garcia was Mexican (born in Zacatecas), and his 1904 edition was published in Mexico. He was an avid book collector, especially of things Mexicana, so it must have been a special moment for him when he first compared the two Spanish language versions of the Diaz history.

In the same introduction, the English translator Maudslay points out in a footnote that the word *cue*, meaning temple (see **BERNAL DIAZ IN HIS OWN WORDS**), was not a Nahuatl word or a Mayan word but a word the Spaniards had learned in the Caribbean and had carried with them to Mexico.

Garcia did not pull his punches with regard to the atrocities committed by the Spaniards in the New World. He wrote of the “inhuman massacre carried out by Pedro de Alvarado in the precincts of the great Teocalli [during the period of unrest after the surrender of Montezuma], which Alonzo de Avila pronounced to be disgraceful, saying that it would forever remain ‘an ill memory in New Spain’.” And of the reaction by Cortes to the uprising that followed the massacre, he wrote that Spanish attempts to retake Tenochtitlan were frustrated by the stiff resistance of the Mexicans, so Cortes “began Vandal-like forays” in the vicinity, “enslaving and branding with a hot iron all the youths and women they met with. The inhuman mark was placed ‘on the face,’ and not even the most beautiful young women escaped it.”

As to the whereabouts of Bernal Diaz in all this, Garcia said that “the author did not assist in all these forays because [reportedly] ‘he was very ill from fever and was spitting blood’.”

The Garcia introduction and the Maudslay translation of it also offer some insight into Diaz’s background and the character of the Castilian language and culture. The father of Bernal Diaz del Castillo was Francisco Diaz del Castillo, so his mother’s name (Maria Diez Rejon) did not factor into the common construction of his own name. Bernal Diaz considered himself a gentleman, to use Maudslay’s term, but Garcia’s term *hijodalgo* is much more accurate and interesting, and only proves once again that something

is always lost in any translation. Hijo means son in Castilian, and hidalgo means lesser nobility, a social level all average Castilians aspired to in the 16th century. According to the social code of the time, it was okay to be poor if you could trace your roots to nobility, and in some sense it was even complimentary. Hence Don Quixote, the most famous poor hidalgo who ever graced the world's stage, and hence Diaz himself, who in old age considered himself blind and poor. The intentional play on words employed by artists like Cervantes is what is missed when a reader reads in translation, and the natural play on words built into the Castilian language is what is missed even in lesser works.

In My Father's House

Hugh Thomas wrote the introduction to a late 20th century reprint of the Maudslay abridgment, and in it he said that Diaz eventually had twelve children in the New World, three by two different native women, then nine by his Spanish wife. The first native woman, a gift from Montezuma, bore him two half Mexican children, and a second native woman bore him a half Guatemalan child. A Castilian woman who he married then bore him nine Spanish children.

According to Genaro Garcia, the gift from Montezuma of a native princess had also included gold and clothes.

This was not the first instance where Spanish conquistadors were given native women as gifts. Along the coast near Tabasco, before the Cortes troop even knew about Tenochtitlan, they were given gold, clothes, and twenty young women as a peace offering from previously hostile natives.

Among the twenty women was “a most excellent person who when she became a Christian took the name of Dona Marina,” Diaz wrote. Cortes “drew all the caciques aside, with Aguilar the interpreter,” and told them “how grateful he was for what they had brought.” Then “Cortes gave one of the women to each of his captains, and Dona Marina, being good-looking, intelligent, and self-assured, went to Alonso Hernandez Puertocarrero. And when Puertocarrero returned to Spain, Dona Marina lived with Cortes, to whom she bore a son....”

Double standards aside, in the above passage (excerpted from the Cohen translation) we are given the facts of cohabitation and shown the results of sex, but there is little or nothing to indicate sexual desire, and little or nothing to make any of the characters seem human. Maybe that explains why Diaz rejected the missing passage recently found in Brazil (see **16th CENTURY SPANISH DOCUMENT FOUND**). That particular passage may have had the singular fault of showing human frailty being bandied about by Christian and non-Christian sensibilities in a foreign environment where the natural tendency would be to relax one's moral standards.

On the other hand, Diaz was writing a historical account, not a racy novel, and the last thing he wanted was to seem blasphemous, so that passage may have been rejected because it was too suggestive, and too complicated.

Settlement of the New World coincided with the Inquisition in Spain that had been set up after 1492 to guard against backsliding Jewish converts to Christianity (Conversos) and Muslim converts to Christianity (Moriscos). (See **1492 AND THE KINGDOM OF GRANADA**.) The Inquisition was evidence that traditional Christians did not believe in the sincerity of people who had been forced by edict to convert. That mistrust led to an emphasis on pure blood (*limpieza de sangre*) in Spain, whereby everybody was anxious to prove there was no Jewish or Muslim blood in their ancestry, and an emphasis on Spanish-ness in the New World, where an elaborate caste system developed after settlers mixed with natives. Unmixed Spanish-ness in the New World was at the top of the hierarchy for several centuries after the Conquest, and it could be argued that it still holds precedence today, since whites (in Mexico, for example) often refer to the majority population as "indios."

The Diaz offspring and the Cortes offspring were some of the first ethnic mixes produced in the New World, being half Spanish and half native. Later generations who did not make a concerted effort to retain their Spanish-ness would produce children who were one-quarter Spanish, one-eighth Spanish, and one-sixteenth Spanish, until finally the Spanish-ness for all intents and purposes vanished from the native population. Somewhere along the line it became very confusing to keep a family tree in order, and in recent times it is only guesswork. Today many ethnic Mexicans, for example, claim they are descendents of Aztecs, but in fact nobody knows for sure, and the only certainty is the Spanish surname.

In my father's house are many mansions, begins a Bible verse, but it could be argued that there is no idyllic past or future for New World natives, then or now. Historic greatness has always been a treasured mirage (see **BERNAL DIAZ IN HIS OWN WORDS**), just as some sort of heaven has always been a heartfelt hope. To some minds, all that remains of the Spanish and native encounter are miracles and imagination.

Miracles

Dona Marina is a controversial character in Mesoamerican history because without her help there would have been a linguistic barrier between Cortes's army and Montezuma's Mexico, and the Conquest might not have happened at all, since verbal trickery was a big part of Cortes's success. According to Bernal Diaz, Dona Marina was a person of stature in the native community who lived with Cortes, bore him a child, and became a valued collaborator in the Spanish contingent. The group's first translator, Aguilar, spoke Mayan and Castilian, while Dona Marina spoke Mayan and the language of Mexico. She could communicate with Mexican ambassadors and explain those communications to Aguilar, and he in turn could explain those communications to Cortes. Acquiring Dona Marina as a gift from the natives of Tabasco was in fact the turning point for the Cortes expedition, according to Diaz. "This was the great beginning of our conquests and thus, thanks be to God, things prospered with us. I have made a point of explaining this matter because without the help of Dona Marina we could not have understood the language of New Spain and Mexico." Interestingly, Dona Marina is pictured alongside Cortes in the Florentine Codex.

Dona Marina's legend has grown over the centuries, and today she is viewed in some circles as a peacemaker and negotiator who tried to save lives through diplomacy. She is also seen by some as a mother figure for modern Mexico, usually in a derogatory sense, and often juxtaposed to the other mother figure in modern Mexico, the Virgin of Guadalupe—the miraculously brown-skinned version of the Holy Mother who made her appearance in the 16th century near the former site of an Aztec temple.

Straddling two cultures and two religions in war and peace is in many ways like coming to terms with art and ugliness, the horrible and the transcendent, the meaningful and the unspeakable. Not everybody is capable of it, and not

everybody survives it, and thus Dona Marina has become in some circles a heroine of Mesoamerican history.

Of course, all of those same conflicts affected Bernal Diaz too, and we have evidence of it in his history.

Bernal Diaz the soldier received many wounds in battles against New World natives, and was lucky to have lived through his adventures, which may in part account for his notable determination to write his narrative, as people who survive traumatic ordeals often feel bound to tell their stories. Many military veterans, in fact, cannot rid themselves of the memories of war, so at least Diaz found a constructive outlet for his experiences. Readers usually assume that Diaz settled in the New World for political or economic reasons, but it is just as likely that he settled there because it was difficult to separate from a country that had become so meaningful to him and such a big part of his life.

It is curious to note that Saint James, the patron saint of Christian Spain during wars against Muslim political entities on the Iberian peninsula, was also the patron saint of the conquistadors in battles against Mesoamerican natives in the New World. Thus “Santiago!” was the rallying cry of both the “Reconquest” (of Muslim Spain) and the “Conquest” (of New Spain). Interestingly, the Christian conquest of the last Muslim political entity in Iberia preceded the Christian conquest of Tenochtitlan by only thirty years. When Columbus discovered the New World in the same year that the last Muslim kingdom was vanquished, he had established a clear case of manifest destiny for Christian Spain. (See **1492 AND THE KINGDOM OF GRANADA.**)

Modern critics sometimes reject the Spanish influence in Mesoamerican history in favor of Mesoamerican culture and Mesoamerican values. Their argument is that the abiding values of modern Mexico, for example, are those of the Aztecs and other pre-Conquest civilizations. On the other hand, certain manifestations of the Spanish influence cannot be denied. For some, therefore, everything turns on the Virgin of Guadalupe, the brown-skinned Holy Mother who has become the religious and cultural personification of modern Mexico. You can reject Christianity, said one famous Mexican writer, but to be Mexican you cannot reject the Virgin of Guadalupe.

Miracles, you see, are not necessarily religious in Mexican culture—they just happen.

Hope or Despair

The Virgin of Guadalupe made her miraculous appearance near the former site of an Aztec temple dedicated to the earth goddess Tonantzin, and from the beginning the brown-skinned Holy Mother was identified with the pagan goddess. This identification allowed the Church to recruit converts among the native population, and it allowed the native population to continue to worship in their own way, if only in secret. Thus in 16th century Mexico there were “secret Aztecs” just as in 16th century Spain there were “secret Jews” and “secret Muslims.”

Books and architecture were two of the most important hallmarks of Aztec civilization. Folding books spoke of Aztec history and Aztec values, while Aztec architecture spoke of a people’s stature, their place in the world, and their religion. The Spanish did their best to destroy both native art forms in a very short period of time. Most folding books were burned shortly after the Conquest (see **MEXICO: THE FLORENTINE CODEX**), and native architecture, particularly in the vicinity of Tenochtitlan, was quickly put asunder as well. By the time Bernal Diaz wrote his history, it was mostly gone. “These great towns and temples and buildings...nothing is left standing,” wrote Diaz. (See **BERNAL DIAZ IN HIS OWN WORDS**.)

It is nearly impossible to believe that a civilized European nation could commit such atrocities, but armies of the most advanced societies often do unforgivable things, and even today occupation forces frequently show little or no respect for the people and places they occupy. Accounting for this behavior logically or morally, however, is another matter entirely.

A small church was first built on the former site of the temple to Tonantzin in the 1530s. Bigger and bigger incarnations were then built until finally the huge Basilica of Guadalupe was constructed in 1976. Today the Basilica is one of the main attractions in Mexico City, drawing millions of visitors each year. It is a testament to the power of the Catholic Church—and particularly to the influence of the Virgin of Guadalupe—that modern worshippers feel hope for the future rather than despair for the past.

The immense, ultramodern Basilica is strangely reminiscent of the huge pyramids that still stand near Mexico City, too big for the Spaniards to totally destroy, too meaningful for the natives to forget. “In my father’s house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you.”



Basilica of Guadalupe (*courtesy sancta.org*)

Mexican Genealogy

At the time of the Conquest, Tenochtitlan was populated by the Mexica people, or Aztecs, so much so that the Spanish called it Mexico, a word they learned from other natives even before they made their way inland from the sea. As Cortes’s army approached Montezuma’s Tenochtitlan, the Aztecs or Mexica people were, however, only a small part of the overall population of what is today called Central Mexico. They held sway over their neighbors and collected tribute from them, but relatively few people in the great Aztec empire were actually Aztecs. The situation was analogous to 5th century BC Greece, when Pericles was extorting money from his neighbors. Athens had a great empire, but few people in that empire were actually Athenians.

The fact that the Aztecs were outnumbered by their neighbors worked to Cortes’s advantage because he was able to recruit many of those neighbors in his war against Montezuma. In the end, therefore, empire actually worked against the Aztecs.

Three centuries later, most of New Spain—which included parts of what is now the United States—was labeled Mexico, and its inhabitants Mexicans, but very few of those people were actually descendents of the Aztecs. Thus modern “Aztec princes and princesses” on both sides of the Rio Grande are

very likely playing with the truth. On the other hand, owing to Our Lady of Guadalupe's apparent identity with the pagan goddess Tonantzin—Church documents actually show that she requested a temple in her name be built near the former site of the pagan temple—Mexicans today often identify with the Aztecs. Curiously, that association was encouraged when the first president of independent Mexico (1824) changed his name to Guadalupe Victoria. Yet the problem remains: If not Aztec, what?

Today, Internet websites trace Mexican genealogy by Spanish surname, but that doesn't help determine one's native ancestry. Thus if a Mexican or Mexican American knows the birthplace of his great grandparents, he can only assume that somewhere along the line a Spaniard with his surname mixed with a native woman local to that area. But the search for origins is complicated, and something of a statistical impossibility, since the genealogy of mothers is lost to all but oral history.

Still, if the birthplace of great grandparents is known, an educated guess about tribal native ancestry can be made, thanks to the Aztecs and their few surviving records. The place-name Zacatecas, for example, is known to be the Nahuatl word for the people who lived in that area (Zacatlan) before the Spanish Conquest. There remains, however, the question of migration during the three hundred year colonial period and the early years of independence, so it cannot be known for certain if great grandparents born in Zacatecas were actually related to the Zacatecas people.

The search for origins, like the search for native ethnicity generally, is clouded by Mexico's tumultuous five hundred year demographic history, including the diaspora of the early 20th century when countless families fled their homes and walked to the United States during the Mexican Revolution, in effect recreating the Alta Mexico of the early 19th century.

Interestingly, natives and native mixes remained the majority population in modern Mexico, with whites in the minority, while in the United States whites from Europe became the majority population and natives became largely isolated from the main currents of American society. Even today Native Americans are mostly invisible, while Mexican Americans have become the largest and most influential native population in America, especially when it is time to “get out the Hispanic vote.”

Hispanic Americans have infused American society with new perspectives on daily life, enriching everything from food and music to books and film. Most prominent in this ongoing “Latinization” process, however, has been the influence of liberation theology on mainstream Catholic culture. Today, almost anything can happen in the freedom-thinking religious imagination, and it sometimes does.

An Old Conquistador’s Very Modern Dream

FADE IN: BANQUET ROOM, JERUSALEM - NIGHT

There he is. The star of the show. Seated in the middle. Surrounded by his friends.

You’ve seen it all before. It’s the picture of “The Last Supper.” Reproduced a million times. Displayed for our edification. It’s the standard religious version. The company line.

What you don’t see is what happens off camera. Before the picture is taken, when they are alive and real, like you and me. Think of the standard picture. Focus on him. Watch carefully as all the characters come to life.

The first thing you notice is uproarious laughter, which is a shocker, because the chroniclers didn’t want us to know that he and his friends had a sense of humor.

The second thing you notice is that they are drinking, and drinking quite heavily, which is another shocker, because it doesn’t fit into the religious characterization. The most amazing part is the women, who are not even shown in the standard picture.

The truth is that they are telling jokes. Bawdy jokes. Intellectual jokes. Stories of all kinds. They are really very funny guys. But the jokes are obviously a cover for something more serious, because tears are streaming down their faces, like rivers of joy and sadness.

In between jokes, as the laughter dies down, a woman comes into the picture from the left. She is beautiful, and very sensual. She strolls over to the main

character and gives him a passionate kiss. He embraces her affectionately, and then she walks off stage to the right. His friends take notice, and one of them starts to tell another joke.

As the laughter of the latest joke subsides, another beautiful woman walks into the picture from the left. She too goes over to the main character and gives him a loving embrace. They kiss for what seems to be a long time, and then she too walks off stage, leaving him there with his friends.

Finally, after yet another joke and another round of laughter, a third woman walks in. This woman is different than the others. The voices of the friends quickly grow quiet as she walks slowly over to the main character and sits on his lap. She caresses his brow, and then puts her arms around him. They kiss for a long time, like the lovers they have been for several months now. It is a very passionate embrace.

She is deeply in love with him, and has been for a long while, long before all of this religious and political business began. And she doesn't care about the other women in his life. He is a man. He has all the frailties of a man. But he is in love with her, and she knows it, and that is all that matters.

This is a strange picture, if you think about it. It's not the standard version at all. The main character is sitting in the middle of the group, with his lover on his lap, wrapped in a passionate embrace. His friends are looking at the two of them with deep felt admiration, and with profound sadness. They have serious expressions on their faces, and downcast eyes, that finally look away from the couple to their glasses of drink, which are empty. So they pour themselves some more wine.

The woman finally pushes herself away from the main character, gets up slowly, and walks deliberately off stage. The tone of the party has become hushed. It's time for another joke.

One of the friends has an offering. This one is pretty good. Not as funny as some of the earlier jokes, but pretty good. They all laugh again, even the main character. They serve each other more wine. The party continues.

Soon the laughter is uproarious again, and the main character is laughing as hard as the rest. He is even telling jokes himself. And his are the best. After

each joke they all laugh like mad, and laugh so hard that tears stream down their faces. This is really very funny stuff.

As it turns out, he is giving instructions to his disciples. Hilarious instructions. And he has saved his funniest instruction for last.

“And another thing,” he says, to the enormous delight of his friends. “Hide all the eggs. Because if I see any eggs when I get back, the whole deal is off.”

Which is how the Easter bunny fits into the picture. The chroniclers didn't want us to know that either.

By now they are all laughing unrelentingly, and crying at the same time. The party is raucous, but tears are flowing down their faces, and the men are making no attempt to halt the rivers of tears. They are in fact in shock, thinking of the meaning of the moment, exulting in the moment. Exulting in the final moment that they have together.

They all know what is going to happen next. They have read the script a hundred times. They dry their tears, and clean up the table a bit. It wouldn't do for people to see what really happened. They brace up, and somebody paints their picture.

It's the standard picture. You have seen it before. He is seated in the middle, surrounded by his disciples. There is seriousness on all their faces, and it is a very grim situation. It is the last supper. This is the way the chroniclers want it, and he isn't about to buck the system. He knows his role.

Besides, it has been a great party.

FADE OUT AND CUT TO: BEDROOM, GUATEMALA CITY - MORNING

An old white man with pointed beard and graying long underwear stirs from his slumbers in his very modest room. “Huh?” he mumbles to himself as he looks at the simple crucifix hanging on the tattered wall beside the image of the Virgin. Then he glances at a dusty picture of “The Last Supper” and falls back to sleep. Outside his bedroom window time has changed: cars drive by and planes track the morning sky, but he is oblivious to all save his dream as he disappears into bone and then, inexorably, into nothingness.

THE END

DIRECTOR'S TAKE - CITY OF ANGELS STUDIOS: HE WAKES UP IN HIS OWN TIME AND IS CONFUSED UNTIL HE SEES THE CRUCIFIX, THE PICTURE OF THE VIRGIN, AND THE PICTURE OF THE LAST SUPPER. THEN HE FALLS BACK TO SLEEP THINKING OF HIS DREAM. OUTSIDE HIS WINDOW WE SEE THAT IT IS NOW MODERN TIMES, AND AS WE GLANCE BACK AT HIM WE SEE THAT HE HAS DISAPPEARED, FIRST INTO SKELETAL FORM AND THEN INTO NOTHING AT ALL. IS THIS RIGHT? CALL SCREENWRITER TO VERIFY. AND WHERE THE HELL IS MY LUNCH?

Endnote

Improbable as it might seem, Mayan descendents in Mexico and Guatemala have retained a separate identity in the five hundred year period following the Spanish Conquest. Unlike the Aztecs, they survived the centuries as a clearly defined group. Isolated from mainstream society, and speaking their own languages, they are a testament to the enduring vitality of a long lost culture. But the fact that many of them still speak no Spanish has created a cultural barrier that lends itself to poverty and persecution. Here is a brief Associated Press report written in the aftermath of a hurricane that ravaged the Yucatan in 2007.

UH-MAY, MEXICO (AP) – Thousands of Mayan Indians lost their thatch-roofed homes as Hurricane Dean blew through the Yucatan peninsula, but their real wealth was the trees, which now lay scattered and broken in the hurricane's wake. Village after village is carpeted with fallen mangoes, oranges, guanabanas, and marneys that will never be harvested.

Mexico's long-suffering Mayan communities have survived centuries of oppression, expulsion from their valuable land along the Caribbean coast, and many damaging storms. But these people say no other hurricane—not Gilbert in 1988, not Roxanne in 1995, not Wilma in 2005—has hit the Maya so hard.

The Mayan residents had simple requests for aid: a few sheets of roofing, drinking water, and some food to get by now that their harvest has been destroyed.

Images

The city of Merida in Yucatan was named after the city of Merida in Extremadura, the region in Spain from which many conquistadors hailed, including Cortes. Merida, Mexico is a much more stately and sophisticated city than Merida, Spain. Until very recently, the region of Extremadura was the image of what most travelers expected to see in Mexico—small villages set among sage and cactus, where residents wear their Sunday best to watch the daily train pass by.

In Yucatan's small tourist villages, native families can sometimes be seen going from one open-air café to another selling trinkets to vacationers. Not anything indigenous to their culture, just silly little trinkets such as windup spiders and cockroaches. Occasionally, a kind-hearted traveler will give a family hundreds of pesos, enabling them to survive for several more weeks. In exchange, all the native family needs to do is pose for a photograph and lose eternal life.

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