

Translators Can Empower!

Andrew Rohr

What would have occurred in the past if people had not used their superior understanding of language in order to gain benefit? Human history has always provided instances when people of different cultures had to communicate with one another; without the ability to communicate, human beings would be isolated. Isolation would kill the human race; humans need to be nurtured by interaction with others. However, humans cannot receive this nurture through osmosis. Humans have always worked together actively so that the developmental needs of individuals could be addressed. Humans have used communication not only as a source for open-ended exploration of the human imagination but also as a form of empowering and disempowering others. One could state that a translator holds the capacity to cause a civilization to falter as evidenced in the experience of the Aztecs and other Native American peoples. The translators, Malinche and Aguilar, undermined the Aztecs and other Native American peoples by giving Cortes the ability to communicate effectively with the groups he wanted to conquer. By reading articles from the PBS *Conquistadors*' website, *Broken Spears*, *Labyrinth of Solitude*, "To Make Them Stand in Fear," and "Decolonizing the Mind," the reader becomes cognizant of how a translator can play an active role in sustaining or terminating a civilization.

In the winter of 1519, in the South Central region of present-day Mexico, Cortes started connecting himself to the right individuals, specifically a Spanish/Mayan translator named Geronimo de Aguilar. His connection to Aguilar became even more important when, "through Geronimo de Aguilar, he would be able to talk to Malinche in Mayan, and then through her, Malinche, speak with the Mexicans in Nahuatl" (PBS). With Aguilar and Malinche at his side, Cortes was able to express himself as in the following scenario: "Cortes presented himself as the

ambassador of a king who ruled ‘the greater part of the world.’ Cortes asked after Montezuma to find out his wishes. Cortes then gave the Aztecs a demonstration of his guns and horses” (PBS). If it had not been for his translators, Cortes would not have had an opportunity to meet Montezuma on a level where both parties could understand one another. By using a translator, Cortes could present himself in a manner that would parallel Montezuma’s image of the “returning Quetzalcoatl, ‘the feathered serpent,’ an exiled deity who vowed to return one day to claim his kingdom” (PBS).

If Cortes had come back as the returning Quetzalcoatl without having any ability to communicate with Montezuma himself, then the possibility of the Aztec people becoming skeptical of Cortes and his conquistadors would have been significantly greater. For example, “Cortes continued round the tip of the Yucatan and disembarked at Potonchan, where the natives gave him small offerings of food and a gold mask, but then asked the Spanish to go, saying, ‘We wish neither war nor trade’” (PBS). The difference between the Potonchan natives and the Aztecs is that the Aztecs felt that the conquistadors upheld divine symbolism, whereas the Potonchan natives saw the conquistadors for who they were: ordinary men who just happened to have weapons and horses, two items of celestial terror (PBS). If the conquistadors had been without the ability to impress Montezuma, and the conquistadors had been kicked out of Tenochtilan, Mexican history may have been permanently altered; the conquistadors would never have had the opportunity to affect the Central and Southern American Indian cultures in the way that they did.

One frequently unnoticed attribute of a translator is the ability to take advantage of other people’s vulnerability; translators are not audio tape recorders. A translator possesses the opportunity to give more than just a translation; the translator can give supplemental information

which may or may not influence the receiver of the translation. In regard to the translator named Malinche, she had an opportunity to give Montezuma guidance on how to interact with the conquistadors. If she had known from past experience that “four hundred Indian warriors were driven off with heavy losses” (PBS), then she should have informed Montezuma ahead of time; Montezuma could have organized the Aztec people to band together to prevent the conquistadors from infiltrating the Aztec Empire. However, even though empowering her people to rise against the conquistadors would have been the preferable action to take, the Aztecs were already hindered by many obstacles, making it difficult for them to resist the conquistadors’ advance.

Undermining Cortes’ plans would have been difficult for the Aztecs because their empire lacked pride. The Aztec empire was an autocracy as Paz explains, “The Aztec state was both military and theocratic. Therefore, political unification was preceded or completed by religious unification or corresponded to it in one way or another” (359). To make matters worse, not everyone held the empire’s religious beliefs. Paz explains how the religion was superimposed on the Aztec people: “The systematizations, adaptations, and reforms undertaken by the priestly caste show that the process was one of superimposition, which was also characteristic of religious architecture. Just as an Aztec pyramid often covers an older structure, so this theological unification affected only the surface of the Aztec consciousness, leaving the primitive beliefs intact” (360). Matters only became worse when the people of the Aztec empire came into contact with the conquistadors: “The situation prefigured the introduction of Catholicism, which is also a religion superimposed upon an original and still living religious base... The arrival of the Spaniards seemed a liberation to the people under Aztec rule” (Paz 360).

Who would want to live under a religious form of government that promotes a strict caste system, along with daily killings of innocent people, otherwise known as live human sacrifices? These live human sacrifices were a staple in the daily life of the Aztecs; the blood spilt by the sacrifices allowed the Aztecs to feel safe, for these sacrifices were used to please the gods. With that in mind, being an Aztec was no easy task. Not only were the Aztecs forced to follow the mandates of those in authority, but they were also forced to take part in the deadly rituals. There were three major problems in the lives of the Aztecs: first, the caste system; second, the forced theocratic militant state; third, ordinary individuals were living in fear; an ordinary Aztec person had to live, knowing that he or she or a family member may meet his or her demise by being sacrificed alive to please the gods.

Having taken into account the three elements mentioned above, one could see how the Aztecs would welcome the conquistadors as liberators. At least their deaths to the Spaniards could, at the minimum, be seen as justified by the prophecies: “The arrival of the Spaniards was interpreted by Moctezuma, at least at the beginning, not so much as a threat from outside than as the internal conclusion of one cosmic period and the commencement of another” (Paz 361). As a result of believing the prophecies, the Aztecs knew that eventually their time would be up, so they decided that instead of trying to go against fate, they would go with it. The Aztecs hoped that the Spaniards would deliver them away from their current caste system. A stark contrast is exhibited between the Aztecs’ cultural attitudes and those of the African-American slaves described by Kenneth M. Stampp in “To Make Them Stand in Fear”: a neglected slave living in the antebellum South had more will to live than an individual living in the Aztec empire in the sixteenth century. Stampp explains how the Southern plantation owners tried to maintain psychological control over their slaves as follows:

Here, then, was the way to produce the perfect slave: accustom him to rigid discipline, demand from him unconditional submission, impress upon him his innate inferiority, develop in him a paralyzing fear of white men, train him to adopt the master's code of good behavior, and instill in him a sense of complete dependence... But the goal was seldom reached. Every master knew that the average slave was only an imperfect copy of the model. He knew that some bondman yielded only to superior power – and yielded reluctantly. This complicated his problem of control. (150)

The fact that the plantation owners admit to having difficulty in keeping their slaves docile means that despite their terrible conditions, the African-American slaves in general maintained a will to live, which was not evident in the Aztec population at the time of the conquistadors' invasion.

Since the Aztecs had no interest in preserving or continuing their own traditions, they ultimately abnegated their own feelings of violation when the Spaniards trespassed on their soil. It is important to note the Aztecs' deficiency in pride because "Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture" (Thiong'o 168). To be without a culture is to put a people's identity at stake. Thiong'o clarifies this idea when he states, "But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world.... To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others" (168). Thiong'o's description of self-definition meshes well with the thoughts of Octavio Paz: "One part of the Aztec people lost heart and sought out the invader. The other, betrayed on all sides and without hope of salvation, chose death" (362). Taken together, these two ideas

mean that when people lose their ability to connect with others, they experience feelings of isolation and despair; they will no longer find their hearts connected to the human endeavor; thus, their mentality becomes suicidal.

Even though the behavior of the conquistadors was barbaric and unwarranted, the way the conquistadors were killing, with swift executions, seemed preferable to death by live sacrifice in the mind of the average Aztec. Leon-Portilla provides an eye-witness account of the swift killing methods of the Spaniards:

The Spaniards attacked the musicians first, slashing at their hands and faces until they had killed all of them. The singers--and even the spectators-- were also killed. This slaughter in the Sacred Patio went on for three hours. Then the Spaniards burst into the rooms of the temple to kill the others: those who were carrying water, or bringing fodder for the horses, or grinding meal, or sweeping, or standing watch over this work. The king Motecuhzoma, who was accompanied by Itzcohuatzin and by those who had brought food for the Spaniards, protested: "Our lords, that is enough! What are you doing? These people are not carrying shields or macanas. Our lords, they are completely unarmed! (2)

The Aztecs faced a choice between two cultural traditions which were toxic to their mentality. Both were really replicas of one another. Life under the rule of Montezuma and of the theocratic militant state hit the psyche hard due to the live human sacrifices, yet the disease and manslaughter that came with the recklessness of the conquistadors were equally debilitating. The conquistadors also undermined the soul of the Aztecs and other Indian peoples with their boastful, harmful, and dogmatic presentation of the Christian faith. When the conquistadors talked to the Aztecs and were able to persuade Montezuma and his people to recognize the

Christian faith instead of their accustomed faith, the Aztec empire started to fall apart. With death and disease all around them, they decided either to commit suicide or to let their desperate situation take control of them, for they had nothing left to hope for. The Aztecs' hopelessness may be attributed to a lack of understanding of their own personal endeavors; in other words, the Aztecs failed to call upon a translator to help them translate the significance of their existence. The Aztecs failed to understand their own culture because they were living uneducated in a theocratic militant caste system. Moreover, they failed to understand the Spaniards' culture because they were betrayed by the translators Malinche and Aguilar, who took away any opportunity that the Aztecs may have had to gain insight into the lives of the Spaniards.

The Spanish conquest of the Aztecs is a clear example of translators being used to disempower others, but is it possible that translators could possess any powers that might be used to empower others? It should be possible for translators to use their powers to benefit others and thus to play a role that is not only pessimistic but also optimistic. One notices that without Guaman Poma de Ayala's work, today's readers would not possess "a detailed statement from the vanquished" (Stearns 521). Without the translations of de Ayala, we would not have become aware of "a critical inside view not of the laws, but of the workings of Spain's empire in America from an Indian point of view" (Stearns 521).

All these texts focus on the notion that all people are similar on a holistic level. The universe is unknown to humankind; if humankind does not pay attention to what is obvious, humankind might lose hope for things not seen. One would not be too mistaken in stating that the Aztecs, due to their autocratic obligations, made life a "cerebral activity and not an emotionally felt experience" (Thiong'o 169). The reason why the Aztecs atrophied was that they were unable to find any personal value or attachment to their existence. Had the Aztecs traded

thoughts with a translator, they might have been able to find meaning in their personal endeavors. Therefore, the power that a translator possesses is significant. As exemplified by the Aztecs' demise, whenever a society lives without a translator, that society may be directing itself towards disaster. Even though a translator may just be an ordinary individual, the power of a translator is immense. By permitting the translator to liberate us from our isolated perception of existence, we may regain our reasons for persistence; thus, we could avoid the gloom that brought the Aztecs to their doom.

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