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**The Effects of Colonization on the Aztecs: Early Colonial  
Period 1521-1550**

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**Senior Capstone**

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## **The Effect of Colonization on the Aztecs: Early Colonial Period 1521-1550**

### **Abstract**

This study is about the effect of the Colonization on the Aztecs, focusing on the early colonial period, which lasted from 1521 to about 1550. The Spanish sought out to colonization Mexico, which would put the Aztec culture in the rearview. With cultural hegemony, the Spanish had a template on how to conquest and colonize.

## Introduction

This study is about the effects of the European Colonization on the Aztecs, focusing on the early colonial period, from 1521 to about 1550. The “Aztec” translates in the Aztec language (Nahuatl) for people of Aztlan<sup>1</sup>. Although according to the legend, their original origins are still unknown. Aztlan is a mythical region where the Aztecs migrated from. The Aztecs came across Tenochtitlan, present day Mexico City, “with the guidance of Huitzilopochtli, the God of War” according to the signs they were looking for.<sup>2</sup> Aztecs leaders knew that Tenochtitlan would make a great area for settlement because they witnessed, “an eagle with a writhing serpent in its beak perched on a cactus.”<sup>3</sup> Within their great cities and the large market places, the Aztecs were highly intellectual in creating an empire like no other in Mesoamerica. They knew about the great civilization of Teotihuacan that stood before them in the sixth century, which had a clear influence in their culture and social/political organization.<sup>4</sup>

The aim of this capstone project is to explore our current understandings on how the Aztec culture and Empire emerge and consolidated. More specifically, it is aimed at exploring the birth of a new cultural developed by deep roots of the Mexican culture within and beyond Mexico.

While there is a consolidated and vast body of literature on these issues, this project is intended to critically analyze some of the traditional understandings of what the

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<sup>1</sup> James Diego Vigil, *From Indians to Chicanos: The Dynamics of Mexican American Culture* (Prospect Heights, IL.: Waveland, 1998) 15.

<sup>2</sup> Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands: La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 27.

<sup>3</sup> Anzaldua, *Borderlands*, 27.

<sup>4</sup> Vigil, *From Indians to Chicano*, 16.

Aztecs empire was from the perspective of people that are far removed from it both geographically and in time, but nonetheless, examine the perspective from both sides of the spectrum. The project, then, is intended to critically explore such materials. As an author, I am intrigued and personally interested in the topic. Since a child, the Aztec culture always fascinated me, and the interest of the Aztecs grew increasingly as an adult. Perhaps the most important questions is that Mestizaje, understood as the lasting effects that colonization had on the people of the Valley of Anahuac (land between the waters), effects that have had a prolonged impact on the populations of Mexico. Mestizaje in theory is the fusing of different cultures but in practice it gets combined into the idea of mixing races. The Valley of Anahuac is what the Aztecs called the Valley of Mexico, which consisted of volcanoes, mountains, Lake Texcoco, Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, Tlacopan, Chalco, and other surrounding villages.

### **Research Questions**

What methods and strategies did the Spanish employ to colonize the indigenous people of Mexico? How did the Aztecs and their descendants respond to this process of colonization?

Evidence for this capstone was collected through analyzing the works of James Lockhart, Miguel Leon-Portilla, and James Diego Vigil. The authors shed a different light on the topic of the colonization of the Aztecs. These authors have done major research and are leading scholars in this field. They have examined the primary documents from the Spanish and the Aztecs which they included their analysis.

Hernan Cortes, conquistador of the New World (Americas) and Bernal Diaz del Castillo, a chronicler wrote their own separate accounts about the conquest of the Aztecs.

They provided a European testimony of New Spain, which was unfamiliar to them. Author Jacques Soustelle describes the work of Diaz and Cortes by stating, “It is true that neither of them attempted to see and understand objectively; their eyes were chiefly fixed upon fortifications and weapons, wealth and gold.”<sup>5</sup> According to Soustelle, they knew nothing of the native language, and they were disgusted by the Aztec religion, which they thought was devil-worship. Their works illustrate evidence with great value, with their perspective we can visualize something that no person ever be witness to again.

Before contact omens as described by the informants of missionary Bernardino de Sahagun, which he rejected much of the native culture, however he came to admire many qualities of the Aztecs. In *the Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, it explains a total of eight bad omens, the first bad omen is described as a fiery signal in the sky. *The Broken Spears* states, “It appeared at midnight and burned till the break of day, but it vanished at the rising of the sun.”<sup>6</sup> The second bad omen occurred in the temple of Huitzilopochtli, when it burst into flames with the reason being unknown. The Aztecs were curious about the meanings of these omens, whether the omens meant an approaching war or some other crisis.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, these omens were seen as strange wonders by Munoz Camargo born in 1529, author of *History of Tlaxcala*, an illustrated codex. He had different perspectives from Sahagun’s informants being that he was mestizo, mixed with Native and Spanish blood. From his descriptions, it is clear he is not in favor of the Aztec culture as he calls Huitzilopochtli a demon when explaining the

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<sup>5</sup> Jacques Soustelle, *Daily Life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest* (Stanford University Press, 1970), xix.

<sup>6</sup> *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) 4.

<sup>7</sup> *The Broken Spears*, 13.

fire that took place at the temple. Fernando Alvarado Tezozomoc, author of the *Cronica Mexicana*, connects how Motecuhzoma consulted with various seers and magicians to learn the meaning of the omens but they had no explanations for Motecuhzoma.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, Tezozmoc explains that a poor macehual (common man) from the Gulf reported to Motecuhzoma the first word of the appearance of “towers or small mountains floating on the waves of the sea.” A later report stated that these “mountains” contained strange man who “have very light skin, much lighter than ours. They have long beards, and their hair comes only to their ears.”<sup>9</sup> This news disturbed Motecuhzoma even more than the omens. Motecuhzoma had no other choice but to send messengers and gifts to the strangers, considering that it might be Quetzalcoatl returning to Mexico, just like the codices and traditions promised they would.<sup>10</sup>

In preparation in greeting the strangers Motecuzoma summoned two of the best artist to make gifts. Motecuhzoma told one of the craftsman:

“Make a throat-band or chain of gold, with links four fingers wide and very thin, and let each piece and medallion bear rich emeralds in the center and at the sides, like earrings, two by two. Then make a pair of gold bracelets, with chains of gold hanging from them. And do this with all the haste in the world.”<sup>11</sup>

With the gifts ready Motecuhzoma sent five messengers to greet the strangers. All the objects were placed into a big basket loaded into panniers to withstand the long journey. When the messengers arrived to shore, they were taken in canoes to Xicalanco with the baskets heavily protected. From Xicalanco they continued along the coast until

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<sup>8</sup> *The Broken Spears*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> *The Broken Spears*, 13.

<sup>10</sup> *The Broken Spears*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> *The Broken Spears*, 19.

they spotted the ships of the strangers. When they approached the ships, the strangers asked them:

“Who are you? Where are you from?”

“We have come from the city of Mexico.”<sup>12</sup>

They were able to communicate because Cortes had translators. La Malinche was a native from the Gulf who spoke both Nahuatl and Mayan. According to *The Broken Spears*, Dona Marina, which was what the Spanish called her, joined the Spanish out of her own will and served loyal to the Spanish throughout the Conquest. Jeronimo de Alguilar was a Spaniard who been shipwrecked in Yucatan in 1511 during a voyage. According to *The Broken Spears*, by the time Cortes ransomed him from the natives eight years later, he spoke Mayan fluently. According to *The Broken Spears*, La Malinche translated the Nahuatl of the messengers into Mayan for Aguilar, who then translated it into Spanish for the conquistadors.<sup>13</sup>

The Spanish and the messengers exchanged more words, Cortes felt confident in allowing the messengers on board. The messengers kissed the floor that Cortes stood on, offering him the gifts from Motecuhzoma. Cortes asked them:

“And is this all? Is this your gift of welcome? Is this how you greet people?”

The messengers replied: “This is all, our lord. This is what we have brought you.”<sup>14</sup>

Things then escalated as Cortes gave orders to have the messengers chained by the feet and neck. Cortes frightened the messengers by firing a cannon, the messengers

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<sup>12</sup> *The Broken Spears*, 25.

<sup>13</sup> *The Broken Spears*, 31.

<sup>14</sup> *The Broken Spears*, 26.



where shaken up and fainted at the site of a cannon blast. Cortes immediately woke them and challenged them to a sword fight since he had heard that the Aztecs were great warriors. The messengers explained to Cortes that this was not their intention; they were sent to offer the gifts that Motecuhzoma made as a gesture of respect. Cortes soon released them, with much panic they hurried to tell Motecuhzoma how the encounter occurred. The messengers rushed through towns without taking a pit stop. One village official told the messengers to get some rest, allowing them to catch their breath.

They told the village official: “No, we must keep on! We report to our king, Motecuhzoma. We will tell him what we have seen and it is a terrifying thing. Nothing like it has ever been seen before!”<sup>15</sup>

While the Motecuhzoma awaited word from the messengers, he could not sleep nor eat, and no one could speak with him. He was going through a stage of depression, nothing seemed to calm him or comfort him. When he heard that the messengers were approaching he ordered them to meet him in the House of the Serpent. At the House of the Serpent two captives were then sacrificed because the messengers had accomplished a difficult mission. After the sacrifices, the messengers told Motechuzoma what they witnessed. Motechuzoma was disturbed and terrified by their reports, and descriptions of the cannon, the iron the Spanish wore and the “big deer” did not settle well with Motecuhzoma.<sup>16</sup> Despite the uncertainty about the nature of the strangers, Motecuhzoma still believed that they might be gods.

This introduction section is intended to provide background information on what was happening during pre-contact. Motecuhzoma was aware that something might occur

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<sup>15</sup> *The Broken Spears*, 29.

<sup>16</sup> *The Broken Spears*, 30.

to his great empire, given the omens that occurred and the strangers in his midst.

Eventually, the Conquest would eliminate Aztec rule and the Spanish would employ their institutions among the indigenous. Overall, Spanish colonization affected Aztec society, culture and political system; this paper includes focus on the contact and conquest which leads to the break of social order, land and living, religious life and the ways of writing.

## **Theory**

The theory that would best fit my topic of the colonization of Mexico by the Spanish would be cultural hegemony. The concept of cultural hegemony, developed by Antonio Gramsci, refers to domination achieved through ideological cultural means. The term refers to the ability of a group to hold power over social institutions, to strongly influence everyday thoughts, expectations, and behavior of different members of society by directing the normative ideas, values, and beliefs that become the dominant worldview of a society.<sup>17</sup> Using this theory will therefore help explain the issues raised in my research question. Furthermore, this theory is intertwining with my research topic because replacing religion and language, has a strong influence on the everyday life and cultures of the indigenous people of Mexico. We see this still to this day because Mexico has a huge Spanish influence. For example, Mexico is a country of Catholics and have adapted to the euro-centric identity by celebrating holidays and customs, which are not indigenous.

According to Gramsci, cultural hegemony represents the dominance of one social class and its value system over another. Roger Salerno in regards to hegemony states, “Those in power rule not simply with an iron fist, but through the delicate and strategic

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<sup>17</sup> Nicki Lisa Cole, “*Cultural Hegemony*,” [http://sociology.about.com/od/C\\_Index/fl/Cultural-Hegemony.htm](http://sociology.about.com/od/C_Index/fl/Cultural-Hegemony.htm), (March 7, 2016).

engineering of a cultural consensus.”<sup>18</sup> For example, in the case of my capstone research, Missionaries relied on Native Mexicans to help them create bilingual religious texts in Spanish and Nahuatl. This implies that preaching the word of Christ in Nahuatl allowed the Padres to convert Native Mexicans in a suitable fashion. Colonizers viewed Natives as primitive but by baptism and conversion, it would allow them to become “civilized”. In the case of my capstone research, we tend to believe that the indigenous peoples of Mexico portrayed Cortes as a God mistaken for Quetzalcoatl. In fact, there is not much evidence that the indigenous people ever seriously thought the Spanish were gods. Therefore, hegemony is consistent in my capstone research as the colonizers wrote the history of first Native and Spanish encounters as very one sided to push their agenda.

### **Methodology**

The research methodology chosen is Historical Method. This requires exploring primary and secondary sources, in order to incorporate different point of views. As a social historian concentration, most of my research will be utilizing archival sources, since my research will focus on analyzing historical facts from indigenous first hand accounts such as *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of the Mexico*, edited by Miguel Leon de Portilla, *Aztec Codices*, Spanish missionary letters and conquistadores’ diaries. My research addresses information not commonly talked about in schools. Contextualizing and utilizing secondary sources can establish a deeper understanding of what my research is trying to prove. With a collection of evidence, I intend to compare and contrast my issues, including at least ten scholarly sources and a body of primary evidence. Demonstrating where different authors stand on a similar

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<sup>18</sup> Roger A. Salerno, *Beyond The Enlightenment: Lives And Thoughts of Social Theorists* (Westport: Praeger, 2004), 103.

subject can serve as good method to inform the audience. Evaluating and critically analyzing my sources will help answer the research question.

### **Selective Sources**

John Lockhart, author of *The Nahuas After the Conquest*, describes three stages of the postconquest evolution of the Nahuas. First stage takes place from 1519 to 1545-50. During this phase, Lockhart states, “Despite great revolutions, reorientations, and catastrophes, little changed in Nahua concepts, techniques, or modes of organization.”<sup>19</sup> Overall, this book provides a lot of complex and in depth information. Mark Christensen, author of “The Tales of Two Cultures,” examines two unofficial texts that provide a rare sighting into a common practice concerning the religious teaching natives obtained and permit for some general conclusions. Miguel Leon-Portilla, author of *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind*, provides insight about the religious worldview of the Aztec. Jacques Soustelle, author of *Daily Life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest*, describes the life of the Mexica, as they said themselves, from the beginning of the 16th century. This book states what kind of civilization the Mexica had before the Spanish invasion. In the introduction, Soustelle explains the great foundation of political system in place. James Diego Vigil, author of *From Indians to Chicanos: The Dynamics of Mexican-American Culture*, explains the Spanish motives for the development of its economic and class system in what they called New Spain. In addition, Vigil demonstrates the roles the indigenous peoples played in this new economic system.

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<sup>19</sup> Lockhart, 429.

## Contact and Conquest

In 1502, Motecuhzoma takes power of the Aztec empire. With 200,000 people, Tenochtitlan was the most populous city in the Americas. On February 1519, the first Spanish conquistadors, lead by Hernan Cortes, invaded the city of Tenochtitlan with six hundred Spaniards along with Native allies. Before the Conquest, Tenochtitlan grew rich and powerful, with its temples, palaces, markets, and beautiful gardens. The Spanish conquistadors were so amazed by the magnificent city that they gazed in astonishment.<sup>20</sup> *The Broken Spears* stated, "...despite the Spanish amazement at the splendors of Tenochtitlan... considered the Aztecs as barbarians and thought only of seizing their riches and of forcing them to become Christians and Spanish subjects."<sup>21</sup> Bernal Diaz del Castillo described Motecuhzoma as he followed Hernan Cortes in 1519 when the Spanish entered the city. The Spanish described Motechzoma as,

... a 40-year-old, with good height and well-proportioned, slender, but the natural color and shade of an Indian. He did not wear his hair long, but so as just to cover his ears, his scanty black beard was well shaped and thin.<sup>22</sup>

When we read about the Conquest of Mexico we tend to believe that the indigenous peoples of Mexico portrayed Cortes as a God mistaken for Quetzalcoatl. In addition, there is a myth that Quetzalcoatl left Mexico and would return from the east. However, Camilla Townsend states," In fact, there is little evidence that the indigenous people ever seriously believed the newcomers were gods, and there is no meaningful evidence that any story about Quetzalcoatl's returning from the east ever existed before

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<sup>20</sup> *The Broken Spears*, xxxii

<sup>21</sup> *The Broken Spears*, xxxiii

<sup>22</sup> Richard F. Townsend, *The Aztecs* (Thames & Hudson, 2009) 39.

the conquest.”<sup>23</sup> Townsend makes good points as she describes that the Indians did not lack knowledge or their culture was “less developed” even if they did believe the Spanish were gods.<sup>24</sup> Within the first few years after the Conquest was over, the Aztecs displayed few indications of believing that gods were in their midst. The obvious reasons the Spanish had the advantage over the indigenous was due to the technology the Spanish had equipped. Although, the Spanish had the technology on their side, technology is not necessarily a function of their intelligence.

According to Gloria Anzaldua, before the conquest, there were twenty-five million Native peoples in Mexico and the Yucatan. Immediately after the Conquest, the Native population had been reduced to fewer than seven million. By 1650, only one-and-a-half-million pureblooded Natives remained.<sup>25</sup> Essentially, the Spanish and the Aztecs confronted one another with steel blades versus swords of obsidian, guns versus arrows and iron helmets versus feather head-dresses. Soustelle stated, “Places, pyramids, raised causeways across the lakes, stone statues and turquoise masks, processions blazing with jewels and plumes, priests, kings, sacred books, all this was to melt and vanish like a dream.”<sup>26</sup> The conquest eliminated Aztec authority which allowed the Spanish to take control of the region.

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<sup>23</sup> Camilla Townsend, “Burying the White Gods: New Perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico.” *The American Historical Review*. 108 (2003): 659.

<sup>24</sup> Townsend, “Burying the White Gods: New Perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico,” 661.

<sup>25</sup> Anzaldua, *Borderlands*, 27.

<sup>26</sup> Soustelle, *Daily Life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest*, xv.

## Breakup of Social Order

In terms of conflict, there were many sources of it between the Spanish and the Aztecs. The conquistadores entered the Valley of Mexico to seek wealth, territory, and to enslave the indigenous population. To illustrate their superiority, the Spanish often murdered entire Indian groups. For example, the massacre at Chulula left the men of Chulula dead, they had not foreseen or expected it. *The Broken Spears*, states, “They faced the Spaniards without their swords or their shields.”<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, the conversion of the indigenous to the Christian faith and gaining glory was the objective as well. For instance, when Cortes traveled inland on his way to Tenochtitlan, he and his men arrived to Tezcoco only to be welcomed with gifts of food. Cortes wished to repay their hospitality by teaching Prince Ixtlilxochitl (of Tezcoco) the law of God with the help of his interpreter Aguilar.<sup>28</sup>

The Spanish displayed their greed for gold when they were presented gifts of gold. For instance, *The Broken Spears* stated, “Their bodies swelled with greed, and their hunger was ravenous; they hungered like pigs for that gold.”<sup>29</sup> Although, during to colonial era, once sources of wealth decreased, the Spanish elected other means of production. This rising conflict between the Spanish and the Aztecs would soon reach its climax when the Spaniards arrived in Tenochtitlan. The Spanish held Motecuhtzuma, the Aztec emperor, hostage in his own on city. With the capture of Motecuhzoma, the Spaniards take possession of the city. This strategy worked to prevent the annihilation of the Spanish. Aztec social order would breakup with the fall of the Aztec capitol of

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<sup>27</sup> *The Broken Spears*, 41.

<sup>28</sup> *The Broken Spears*, 58.

<sup>29</sup> *The Broken Spears*, 51.

Tenochtitlan. The destruction of the city occurred when Cortes travelled to Vera Cruz. Other Spaniards sent from Cuba initiated the fighting with the Aztecs during a dance ceremony. The Natives ran away for protection to escape a massacre but there was no hiding from the Spanish. By the time Cortes arrived, it was too late and there was nothing to do but flee the scene. It was a clash of two different worlds, but the Mexica's world would be torn apart.

Historian Alan Knight makes a case for cultural hegemony when he stated, "The Spaniards, it has been suggested were more prepared than other European imperialists to impose their culture in their colonial subjects by force."<sup>30</sup> The Spanish were enforcing their power over the Aztecs through violence. It was either bow down to the Spanish and become part of their society or be killed. Becoming part of their society meant to be "civilized" and a Christian. In other words, the indigenous people had to adapt to the cultural hegemony that the Spanish articulated.

## **The Social World of the Aztecs**

### **Land and Living**

Before the conquest, class status and social were necessary for the benefit of the community. The Calpulli system incorporated certain levels of equality disbursing based off battlefield achievements macequals (commoners) made up 85% of the population, the mayequas and tlacotin (the slave like class) making up about 10% of the population and the pipltin (the noble elite and natural leaders) who make up the rest of society. The Calpulli system was a socioeconomic unit based upon blood and social relations,

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<sup>30</sup> Alan Knight, *Mexico: The Colonial Era* (Cambridge, UK, New York, N.Y., USA: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 35.



composed of families with similar ancestry, and organized to share and distribute, land, water, irrigation and hunting privileges. This system created structure, boundaries, and a sense of order. The land and other rights were commonly distributed based on battlefield victories and achievements. Although, we are fortunate to have this knowledge since according to scholar Anna L. Peterson, “It is especially difficult to understand this worldview today because the Spanish conquerors systematically sought to eliminate written, oral, visual, and ritual dimensions of indigenous Mesoamerican worldviews.”<sup>31</sup> Central Mexico was rich and intensive in agriculture at the time of the conquest.

After the conquest, author James Diego Vigil explains the Spanish motives for the development of its economic and class system in New Spain. In addition, Vigil demonstrates the roles the indigenous peoples played in this new economic system. For instance, the motives for this system were to establish and maintain a monopoly enterprise of gold and silver accumulated by the exploited labors of indigenous people. The *encomienda* system was the forced labor of the indigenous people to benefit those who controlled it, the Spanish. Furthermore, Vigil explains that haciendas were ranches headed by the hacendados to produce labor of farming the fields, extracting resources from mines, or any type of physically demanding task placed upon the indigenous people who inhabited the land. Although, the indigenous began to claim roles in the expansion of the colonial empire by exploiting and oppressing their own people in new territories made possible by the changing and merging of the Spanish and Indian culture which allowed expansion and room for new settlers to claim unhampered territories.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Anna L. Peterson, “Indigenous Culture and Religion Before and Since the Conquest” *Latin American Research Review*. 36: 2 (2001), 241.

<sup>32</sup> Vigil, *From Indians to Chicano*, 57.

Vigil gives definitions of the gachupines, crillos, and mestizos and explains their new social order. The gachupines were full-blooded Spaniards born in Spain, who remained at the top of the social class in the New World. According to Vigil, the highest positions of power or authority included religious or social positions such as artists, priests or mine owners. The crillos were Spaniards born in the New World, with the same attitudes of entitlement as their gachupine counterparts, without the same ability to occupy higher positions of social and political power. The mestizos were the racially mixed individuals of Spanish and Indian blood, those who were considered rootless men in the New World of the Spanish, and Old World it eradicated.<sup>33</sup>

Through the cultural hegemony allowing the blending of Spanish and Indian culture came a unique Mexican culture where both cultures mutually picked, chosen and retained syncretic changes. Results of this were new sounds, new words, new types of foods, and colorful ceremonies. Although, many of the indigenous people rejected the Spanish entirely, their own culture traditions slowly became in jeopardy.

### **Religious Life**

Aztec religion was highly complex and somewhat confusing. They sought to preserve the life of the Sun with ceremonial warfare and human sacrifice. According to historian Miguel Leon-Portilla, the ideal of Aztec warriors was complete the mission of the people of Tonatiuh, the sun, who needed precious blood to continue the shine over the world.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, human sacrifice was an honor to the Sun god, to ensure his daily return and keep the people of the Aztec Empire from darkness. It was a noble duty most people saw as a necessary way to serve a greater purpose and move to the beyond.

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<sup>33</sup> Vigil, *From Indians to Chicano*, 86.

<sup>34</sup> Leon-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind*, 177.

The Aztec religion was highly developed and complex, praising deities and temples. However, the Spanish purposed their religion by creating parishes in Nahua territory in the 1520s and it would be complete by the 1540.<sup>35</sup> However, the indigenous resistance was not completely lacking from the picture. According to author Robert Richard, the people of Michoacán for the first five years resisted with great force and violently the coming of the missionaries or the preaching of the Christian faith. In 1541, the rebellion of the Indians of New Galicia also known as the Mixton War, this was a general movement which brought in a large number of tribes. Tribes like the Cascanes who threatened to take the south and center of New Spain.<sup>36</sup>

Toribio de Benavente nickname Motolinia, a Franciscan missionary wrote that in the first five years, no one acknowledged the priests who were trying to reach out to people. When priests established a school, Cortes demanded the indigenous nobles send their sons but the families would send their servants instead. Fray Motolinia stated, “They had no intention of turning their children over to such men and were confident that the newcomers were too stupid or ill informed to know the difference.”<sup>37</sup>

Catholicism and the indigenous pre-Columbian religious beliefs were similar, as stated by Vigil. Among a few of the similarities rooted into the Catholic faith for the sake of appealing to the indigenous masses it was trying to convert baptism rituals, ceremonies, prayers, fasting, as well as heaven, hell and purgatory which were all to familiar concepts for the indigenous people. Those of saints replaced the names of their

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<sup>35</sup> Lockhart, 206.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico: An Essay on the Apostolate and the Evangelizing Methods of the Mendicant Orders in New Spain, 1523-1572* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966) 3.

<sup>37</sup> Townsend, “Burying the White Gods: New Perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico.” 687.

gods. Karen Melvin helps explain cultural hegemony by stating that in the 1600s, Catholicism extended into all aspects of Spanish society, shaping laws, culture, and customs as well as people's systems belief. Together, cities and Catholicism had served as crucial weapons in the cultural hegemony.

### **Ways of Writing**

For over a hundred years before the conquest, the Aztecs did have written language, rather they had visual arts in the form of communication for ways of preserving its cultural traditions. In the Broken Spears, it mentions that the highest civilization in ancient Mexico, such as the Mayas, Mixtecs, Toltecs and Aztecs all succeeded in developing their own system of writing. However, very few pre-Columbian codices have been preserved to illustrates their ways of writing.<sup>38</sup> Codex paper was made from the amate tree by pounding and burnishing the strips of bark. The Broken Spears states, "The Aztec system was a combination of pictographic, ideographic and partially phonetic characters or glyphs, representing numerals, calendar signs, names of persons, place names, etc."<sup>39</sup> In other words, their form of writing is made from pictorial drawings, to a certain extent similar to hieroglyphic writing. The Aztecs created many works of art for religious ritual purposes to pay tribute to the gods. Although, the illustrations from original artists adapted to post-Hispanic codices, the olds modes were used to depict their version of the Conquest.

In terms of pre-Hispanic education, male children attended specialized schools called calmecac or telopchcalli, which most children attended. The students in the calmecac learned to read and interpret the codices and calendars; they also studied tribe's

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<sup>38</sup> Broken Spears, xlv.

<sup>39</sup> Broken Spears, xlv.

history and traditions, and memorized the sacred songs and other documents. Accurate memorization was a major factor after the conquest because it made it possible to record many poems and traditions that would have otherwise been lost forever.<sup>40</sup> The *calmecac* was composed of the sons of nobles and priests but there was some exception for other children. In terms of *telpochcalli*, Broken Spears explained, “The students were taught the fundamentals of religion and ethics, and were also trained in the arts of war.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, the *telpochcalli* offered a more basic and practical education

Mark Christensen explains that after the conquest Missionaries relied on Aztecs to help them create bilingual religious texts in Spanish and Nahuatl. Furthermore, Christensen stated, “The composition of religious texts in indigenous languages was a common tactic of many early modern ecclesiastics throughout the world, both Catholic and Protestant.”<sup>42</sup> Bilingual texts allowed priests to preach Catholicism in Nahuatl and Natives to hear the word of God in their own language. In other words, these texts played a major role in having Natives understand Catholicism in New Spain. According to the Broken Spears, written Nahuatl, using the Latin alphabet, was introduced by the Spanish missionaries soon after the Conquest.<sup>43</sup>

According to Lockhart, the Franciscan friars of the sixteenth century remain unsurpassed in the significance they offered to language, in comprehending the indigenous population of Mexico.<sup>44</sup> The Franciscan friars, with the aid of the Nahuas produced crucial work after another. For example, according to Lockhart, by the late

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<sup>40</sup> Broken Spears, xlv

<sup>41</sup> Broken Spears, xlv

<sup>42</sup> Mark Z. Christensen, “The Use of Nahuatl in Evangelization and the Ministry of Sebastian.” *Ethnohistory*. 59 (2012): 692.

<sup>43</sup> Broken Spears, xlvii.

<sup>44</sup> Lockhart, 5.

1540's, friar Andres de Olmos completed grammar of Nahuatl, along with a list of "idiomatic expressions" and sample of speeches. Furthermore, in the next decade, Alonso de Molina published a Spanish-Nahuatl dictionary, including a vast range, of vocabulary, and identifying grammatical distinctions.<sup>45</sup> The Natives realized that the alphabetic writing that the Spanish brought would have its advantages. According to the Broken Spear, the Spanish conquistadors and certain churchmen burned all of the codices and destroyed the pre-Hispanic centers of education. Remarkably, a few missionaries, precisely Bernardino de Sahagun and Diego de Duran, gathered whatever they could of indigenous literature. Duran and Sahagun managed to acquire a few codices that had escaped the fires, but their major accomplishment was to save many of the old songs and narratives that were still faithfully remembered after the Conquest.<sup>46</sup>

Cultural hegemony is a key system of domination when implying new forms of writing as one aspect of colonization. For example, in *The Broken Spears* it states, "They worked out means of writing the native languages with the Latin alphabet, and this enabled them-and their Indians pupils-to record the texts in the original words."<sup>47</sup> This demonstrates that teaching the indigenous new forms of writing and slowing moving away from the old methods is directing the normative ideas. Cultural hegemony represents the dominance of one social class and its value system over another. Therefore, changing the indigenous' forms of writing is a clear example of Cultural hegemony.

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<sup>45</sup> Lockhart, 6.

<sup>46</sup> Broken Spears, xlvi.

<sup>47</sup> Broken Spears, xlvi.

## **Analysis**

Going into this research it was difficult tackling what specific topic to touch on about the colonization of the Aztecs at the hand of the Spanish. This research could have strictly been about the conversion of the Aztecs into the Christian faith but considering more effects was quite interesting. This paper was overall an eye opener into history. Examining what took place during pre-contact, contact, conquest and post-conquest was extremely helpful to understand the cultural hegemony that took place in order for the Spanish to dominate over the Aztecs. With *The Broken Spears*, it was a clear story-telling book that was fascinating to read. One major learning outcome from this research is that the Aztecs were highly complex people with intelligence and brilliance. Unfortunately, only a few missionaries recognized the uniqueness of the Aztec culture. Through this research, it brings to mind what if the Aztecs and the Spanish coexisted together? There is no telling what would have happened to Mexico and its inhabitants of the land. The contact between the two different worlds was like no other but with cultural hegemony it brings out clash that does not settle well with the oppressed. It is highly impressive that some traditions were preserved with all the destruction that took place.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Aztecs had a desire for complex poetry, mathematical skills, philosophy, art, architecture and the cosmos. Camilla Townsend argues that the Indians did not lack knowledge or that their culture was “less developed” even if they did believe the Spanish were gods.<sup>48</sup> Hegemony is consistent in my capstone research as the

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<sup>48</sup> Camilla Townsend, “Burying the White Gods: New Perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico.” *The American Historical Review*. 108 (2003): 661.

colonizers wrote the history of first Native and Spanish encounters as very one sided to push their agenda. According to Leon-Portilla, the attraction to beauty, the stars, and poetry may have been the main cause for their obliteration in the Spanish Conquest. With metaphors and numbers being a huge part of their culture, unfortunately, weapons of steel and fire overthrew them. Leon-Portilla explains that Aztecs civilization disappeared like a dream and only memory persisted. The beautiful world in which they visualized, along with divine and truth was gone due to when the wise men were alienated, when the documents were burned, and when the temples and status were destroyed into pieces. Cultural hegemony is a key system of domination when implying new forms of writing as one aspect of colonization.