

## From the ashes

Juan D Machin-Mastromatteo

This article was originally published as:

Machin-Mastromatteo, J. D. (2015). Regional consensus gave birth to the modern public library. *Information Development*, 31(4), 383-386. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0266666915577166>

The final publication is available at: <http://idv.sagepub.com/content/31/4/383>

### Abstract

About 523 years ago, the territory now known as the Americas was 'discovered'. This event detonated the conquest and colonization of this 'new world', processes that altered the historical development of the indigenous civilizations. This work examines one of the most disheartening consequences of this clash of civilizations: the almost total destruction of the indigenous people's cultural heritage. This annihilation was driven by the implementation of colonial domination, which implied the establishment of a new socio-political order and the systematic and forced religious conversion, which included the destruction of the codices that were seen as 'works of the devil'.

**Keywords:** Latin America conquest, pictographic codices, pre-Hispanic cultures

### The conquest

During the era of the 'discovery' of America, its conquest and colonization, many European kingdoms implemented new socio-political orders in the territories where they arrived; territories which were neither unoccupied nor inhabited by under-developed cultures. In this column we focus on a very brief recounting of the loss of the intellectual works that were created by the indigenous peoples of Latin America. However, it is necessary to highlight first that the destructive conquering impetus did impact the region in many other ways. Báez (2006) points out some details about the devastation that occurred in Latin America, such as the extraction of the equivalent of 500 tons of gold only until 1560, the plantations that were used to obtain products at low cost by using slave labor, and the ravaging of the forests and soil fertility. This author adds that none of these activities contributed to the development of these 'new' countries; on the contrary they cost many lives, because, in Spanish-speaking Latin America alone, the Spanish conquerors drastically reduced a population of a 100 million indigenous people to the 26 million that survive to this day; and more than 500 autochthonous languages were extinguished.

Although the destruction of cultural legacy, specifically books, has been a recurring subject throughout history and at a worldwide level, the case of the 'new world' may be the most tragic, because it signified the alteration of the course of history for many civilizations. As Báez (2006) comments, historians condemn book burnings in Nazi Germany and during other more recent events, but ignore the destruction of indigenous codices by Spanish Catholic conquerors. However, these processes that have sought the annihilation of cultures and ideas have something in common: they are driven by ignorance, fanaticism, the forced establishment of a new socio-political order and the replacement of the values, ideas, religions, and cultures of the oppressed by those of the conqueror. In Latin America, the establishment of a new order did not necessarily mean a better order; much less it did signify to 'civilize' or bring development to these peoples. Báez (2006) comments that the conquest submitted indigenous and African civilizations to total defeat, because empires cannot be held only by their weapons or their economic and political models; they also need to impose their cultural values and a "*damnatio memoriae* over the defeated nations, because memory is the most important link of national identity,

[hence] it is the first one in being threatened or attacked" (para. 9).

### **The annihilation of memory**

Several authors have highlighted the theme of the destruction of indigenous manuscripts by the Spanish military and religious conquerors, stating that not enough or appropriate attention has been given to it (Benítez, 1988; Báez, 2006; Báez, 2008; Meneses, 2011). Báez (2006) for example, refers to one of his visits to Mexico, during which he tried without much success to track down documents about the destruction of Mayan codices, pointing out that there is a "lethal silence" about the topic and no detailed studies of the materials that were lost. From such problematic, he states that "despite evident efforts to understand the past from a more plural perspective, Latin Americans still feel vertigo when examining our history" (Báez, 2006: para. 13). Meneses (2011) holds that the study of Mexican bibliography traditionally considers that its beginning starts from colonial times (1521-1810), due either to unawareness or to omission of the fact that during this era there was massive destruction of indigenous intellectual works elaborated by the different autochthonous civilizations of the region, such as the Mayan, Mexicas (Aztecs), Mixtecs, Otomies, Purepechas, Toltecs, Totonacs, Zapotecs and many other Mesoamerican civilizations of millenary roots.

According to Meneses (2011), pre-Hispanic civilizations already had methods to elaborate the books that we know today as codices and also had certain words that were associated with information production, such as the Aztec words 'tlamatinis' (wise men), 'tlacuilo' (scribe), 'amoxtlí' (book) y 'amoxcallí' (house of books). Regarding autochthonous intellectual works, we will never know exactly the contents of the lost works. However, Meneses (2011) more or less brings us close to an understanding of such a loss:

"the loss of an incalculable amount of cosmogonical wisdom and repertories with testimonies, values and necessary knowledge that these native peoples managed to gather in relation to the problems, events and ideas involved in their survival during centuries; collections of autochthonous codices and books with information related to administrative, educational, religious, astronomic, genealogical, chronological, mineral, metallurgical, military, political, geographical, medical, historical and social affairs" (p. 29).

In fact, the more we read about the destruction these cultures were submitted to, the more a deep feeling of desolation emerges when faced with such an incalculable loss of cultural heritage and wisdom. The conquest process was catastrophic, because we should be able to know a lot more about these civilizations that had their development truncated or at least profoundly altered, more than 500 years ago; just as we know today more about other civilizations through works such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, *Beowulf*, the *Dead Sea Scrolls*, *The Poem of the Cid*, *The Song of Roland*, *The Song of the Nibelungs*, *Aesop's Fables*, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *The Divine Comedy*, *The Decameron*, *The Prince*, just to cite some works that did survive. Indeed, Coe (1987) points out that our knowledge of Mayan thought represents a small fraction of its totality, as from the thousands of books where their rituals and knowledge were registered, only four survive today. León-Portilla (2003) comments that "with zeal and viciousness they [the conquerors] wanted to erase memory forever (...) the breath, songs, stories and discourses, history, the very same lifeblood of Mexico's first inhabitants tried to be silenced" (p. 43).

The conquest altered indigenous culture, its traditional forms of knowledge, and its means of preserving knowledge, which implied the "death of a knowledge preserving system with millenary roots" (León-Portilla, 1996: 13). Moreover, Florescano (1999) establishes that conquest destroyed the system of collecting and disseminating the past through codices, which meant the end of the documentary means of information transmission from one generation to the next, apart from being a means of harassing dissenting voices that opposed the victor. Not all of the indigenous civilizations had complete writing systems (León-Portilla, 1996); thus, some civilizations employed oral tradition as the means of transmitting stories, testimonies and wisdom from one generation to the next. Although some such stories survive, the impact of conquest was surely equally damaging for oral traditions.

Regarding *amoxcalli*, Meneses (2011) states that some authors have described them as spaces similar to libraries or archives, where they stored the codices (known as 'amoxtlí' in Nahuatl, 'pik hu'un' in Mayan, 'tacu' in Mixtec and as 'indian paintings' by the Spanish conquerors). The *amoxcalli* offered the cultural wealth of the Nahuatl civilization, where the connoisseurs of traditional writing, such as the wise men and scribes, registered and preserved this legacy. According to Lau (2009), Aztec codices registered economic, social and political aspects, as was also the case with other cultures with urban centers, such as the Mayan. León-Portilla

(1982) states that both indigenous and Spanish chroniclers gave testimony of the destruction of *amoxcalli*, together with codices and paintings. Meneses (2011) holds that the destruction of the cultural heritage must have produced great anguish and desolation in the indigenous spirit at seeing the demolition of buildings by the conquering armies and the burning of codices by 'acts of faith' – a procedure of Spanish monks which involved the destruction of what were known as 'works of the devil', because the "beautiful coloring and strange characters of the authentic autochthonous Mayan books made them think that they were objects that 'contained the lies of the devil'" (p. 24). Among these brutal acts, it is fair to point out the cases of religious Spaniards that protested them; as cited by Báez (2006), notable known cases were those of Antonio de Montesinos and Bartolomé de Las Casas. Dominican Antonio de Montesinos, stated in his sermon from 1511, which is known as A voice claiming in the desert: "with what right and with what justice you put these indians under such a cruel and horrible servitude? With what authority have you made such loathsome wars to these peoples whom were in their tame and pacific lands?" Meanwhile, Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, in his Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies from 1643, he asked: "Why are there such and so many ravages and cruelties, killings and destructions..."

Baudot (1979) points out that during the siege of Mexico (Tenochtitlán), the Aztec capital, in 1521, the city was almost completely destroyed and in consequence so were an incalculable number of documents. Meneses (2011) blames the Franciscan Diego de Landa as one of the main destroyer of codices, who in 1562 burned a great amount of Mayan books in the city of Mani and was responsible for incinerating about 70 tons of books of such a millenary culture. Arizpe and Tostado (1993) state specifically that he burned 100,000 Mayan codices; Báez (2006) holds that this would be equivalent to 90% of all Mayan codices that ever existed, and estimates that 60% of the region's written cultural heritage disappeared. Arizpe and Tostado (1993) accuse another religious, Juan de Zumárraga, of ordering the burning of Aztec codices during acts of faith, pointing out that "in his attempt of ending what he considered 'idolatry', he burned down the legacy of Texcoco, where it is calculated that there were hundreds of thousands of Nahuatl codices, from which only fourteen remain" (p. 69). To these acts of immediate destruction, we can add other developments pointed out by Báez (2008), such as the looting and dubious sales that made some codices, the legacy of the Americas' autochthonous civilizations, appear in European libraries. Lau (2009) points out that the most famous of these codices are those known as the Borgia Group, which are now scattered in different European libraries and museums.

To conclude, perhaps the ideal would be to be able to comment that in more recent periods the lesson about preserving the region's cultural heritage was learned. However, this was not the case between the 16th and 20th centuries, because as Báez (2006) indicates: a) libraries, archives and artifacts of the pre-Hispanic and colonial cultural heritage have disappeared; b) dozens of librarians and archivists have been murdered across the region; c) the dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s attacked editorials and caused the death or exile of writers; and d) currently, the institutions dedicated to the preservation of our memory heritage (libraries, archives, museums) lack appropriate budgets to restore and preserve thousands of books of the 19th century. It is hence very difficult to march toward development as a region when, during the last 523 years, we have been continuously losing our autochthonous cultural memory, which is the basis of our civilization.

## References

- Arizpe L and Tostado M (1993) El patrimonio intelectual: un legado del pensamiento. In: Florescano E (ed.) *El patrimonio cultural de México*. Mexico: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes; Fondo de Cultura Económica, pp. 63-90.
- Benítez F (1988) *El libro de los desastres*. Mexico: Ediciones Era.
- Báez F (2006) Saqueo cultural de Latinoamérica. *La Nación*, 29 January. Available at: <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/775915> (accessed 18 May 2015).
- Báez F (2008) *El saqueo cultural de América Latina: De la conquista a la globalización*. Mexico: Debate.
- Baudot G (1979) *Las letras precolombinas*. Mexico: Siglo XXI.
- Coe M (1987) *The Maya* (4th ed.). London: Thames and Hudson.
- Florescano E (1999) *Memoria indígena*. Mexico: Taurus.

*Developing Latin America*

Lau J (2009). Mexican libraries, archives and museums: A snapshot. In: Bates M y Maack N (eds,) *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science* (3rd ed.) Boca Raton: CRC Press.

León-Portilla M (1982) Presentación. En: Mathes M (ed) *Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco: La primera biblioteca académica de las américas*. Mexico: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores.

León-Portilla M (1996) *El destino de la palabra: De la oralidad a los códices mesoamericanos a la escritura alfabética*. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

León-Portilla M (2003) *Obras de Miguel León Portilla. Pueblos indígenas de México: Autonomía y diferencia cultural* (Vol. 1). Mexico: Universidad Nacional de México; el Colegio Nacional.

Meneses F (2011) El desastre de la documentación indígena durante la invasión-conquista española en Mesoamérica. *Crítica Bibliotecológica: Revista de las Ciencias de la Información Documental*, 4(2): 20-32. Available at: <http://eprints.rclis.org/16985/1/cb.vol.4.no.2.meneses.pdf> (accessed 18 May 2015).