

## Excavating Mexico's Philosophical Heritage

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*In this autobiographical essay, I contemplate upon my engagement with Nahuatl culture and philosophy, which spans several decades today.*

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I was born in Mexico City on February 22, 1926. Since my early youth, the ancient cultures of Mexico attracted me from an early age. A prominent scholar, the anthropologist doctor Manuel Gamio, who was married to my father's sister, introduced me and other members of the family, to the world of Mesoamerican culture and history. Together, he and I visited Teotihuacan and other archeological sites on many occasions. And at home I read the classic *History of Ancient Mexico* by the 18<sup>th</sup> century humanist Francisco Xavier Clavijero. That was my introduction to the universe of Nahuatl culture.

Years later, from 1948 to 1961, while studying philosophy at Loyola University in Los Angeles, California, I concentrated in the work of Henri Bergson, specifically his *Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. At about the same time, I was lucky to gain access to the many works published by Fray Ángel María Garibay Kintana. His translations of ancient Nahuatl poetry impressed me so much that I decided to devote myself to the study of Nahuatl thought and literature. It was the year 1952.

Back in Mexico, I visited my uncle, Manuel Gamio, and asked him to help me in approaching Fray Ángel María Garibay Kintana. He was a priest at the Basilica of Guadalupe and also a professor at the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of the National University at Mexico.

From 1952 to Garibay's death on July 1967, I acted as his disciple. In August 1956 I submitted my thesis on Nahuatl thought which I dared to present as Nahuatl Philosophy. In the examination I received a Ph.D. with *laude*.

The thesis was later transformed into a book entitled *La filosofía náhuatl*, which in 1959 was published by the Institute of Historical Research at the Universidad nacional autónoma de México (UNAM) where I was already working. My book was well received by many but also rejected by a good number of local philosophers. They argued a priori that it was absurd to postulate that the Indians of Mexico might have had a philosophy. Nevertheless, the book not only survived but indeed flourished. It included the testimonies in Nahuatl that I translated into Spanish with commentaries.

With the passing of time the book has been reprinted ten times by the same National University Press and in some respects enlarged. Over the years it has been translated into English, Russian, German, French, Czech and Croatian. It was published in English as *Aztec Thought and Practice*, in 1964 by the University of Oklahoma Press. A new edition, revised and enlarged, is currently in press with UNAM.

One can approach the book on Nahuatl philosophy from two different perspectives. The historical perspective approaches indigenous sources related to the worldview and thinking of the *tlamatinime*, Nahuatl sages as is found in the old manuscripts. From this viewpoint one will appreciate the cosmological ideas of the

Nahuas, their metaphysics; anthropological ideas and cultural achievements. Particular attention I give to the doubts expressed by the *tlamatinime* concerning the officially accepted religious beliefs.

Among the philosophical musings and speculations of the sages in the texts we find questions such as: “Can we assert that something is true here on earth?” “Is there anything that remains or is everything like a dream?” “Are we alive and with the Giver of life once we die?”, “What does our heart seek?” and “Where is your heart? If you give it [your heart] to everything, you lead it to nowhere and destroy it.”

The other perspective concerns our own present: are there any ideas raised by the Mexica that continue to be meaningful for contemporary men and women?

There is an expression frequently appearing in the texts which may sound even fastidious. None the less, I believe it deserves attention. The diphase (*difrasismo*) “Flower and song” (*xochitl, cuicatl*) appears to have been applied to a wide gamut of subjects. At its core it is closely related to anything good and beautiful: one has to look for flowers and songs that are often hidden. Our aim can be the discovery of them in things surrounding us. Nahuatl sages repeat that flowers and song are perhaps the only true things on earth.

The concerns of the sages about the ultimate realities, human destiny, history and art, morals, and law are revealing.

Besides publishing the book *Aztec Thought and Culture*, I prepared others: *Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, which has been translated into more than twenty languages.<sup>1</sup> While *Fifteen Poets of Aztec World: Mesoamerican Spirituality* also deals with the culture of the Nahuas, others refer to the living Mesoamerican Indians.<sup>2</sup> Following Manuel Gamio’s advice, I have also paid attention to contemporary indigenous peoples ever since I was appointed the Director of the Interamerican Indian Institute (1960-1976). At that time, I visited native groups living in many places of the Americas from Alaska to Chile and Argentina. I spoke with presidents of a number of Latin America countries in defense of the Indians rights, as well as with Americans such as John Collier, who at that time headed the Commission of Indian affairs.

Years later I have been active in supporting Indian demands. I have written articles and essays and participated in the creation of the House of Writers in indigenous languages. In a few words, my life has been closely related to the Indians not only of Mexico, but other parts of the American countries.

The University has been my home. I acted from 1966 to 1977 as director of the Institute of Historical Research at the UNAM (Mexico). A magazine was then created *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* of which 50 volumes have already appeared to recall some of the activities I have engaged in.

Now, although I am 90 years old, I keep working with students, Mexican and foreign, at the Seminar on Mesoamerican cultures at the UNAM, writing, lecturing at home, and abroad. On December 12, 2014 the Library of the US Congress in Washington, D. C. awarded me the nomination of “Living Legend” which I dare to say, somehow corresponds to my perhaps excessive action.

As to my family, I married Ascensión Hernández Triviño, more than 50 years ago. I met her in a Congress of Americanists that took place in Spain. She left her country (Spain) and adapted so perfectly to Mexican culture that people think she was born in this country. She is a professor at the UNAM and has published on Nahuatl linguistics and other related subjects. We have a daughter, Marisa, who has given us two grandsons, Miguel and Fabio, who are a source of happiness for us.

In contemplating my life at the age of 90 I would like to end this essay quoting from a Nahuatl poem: I can say that my life has been like a dream, a beautiful dream. I have had thousands of students, hundreds of marvelous experiences that lead me to say: Thank you, Lord, I am ready to depart and go to where you dispose.

**Miguel León-Portilla** (b. 1926) has worked on Aztec (Nahua) history, literature, and philosophy. León-Portilla has been the editor of *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* since 1959 and of *Tlalocan* since 1979. He has published more than forty books, including *Vision de los Vencidos*, *Fifteen Poets of the Aztec World*, *The Aztec Image*

*of Self and Society*, and (with Earl Shorris) *In the Language of Kings: An Anthology of Mesoamerican Literature--Pre-Columbian to the Present*. He has received honorary degrees from universities in Mexico, the U.S., Israel, Czechoslovakia, Bolivia, and Peru. His prizes include the Academic Order of the Palm (France), Bartolomé de las Casas (Spain), and Fulbright and Guggenheim fellowships.

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<sup>1</sup> Miguel León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind*, Norman etc.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963; *Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1966.

<sup>2</sup> Miguel León-Portilla, *Fifteen Poets of the Aztec World*, Norman etc.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992.