

Cocoliztli or Cocolitzli?

Indigenous Hemorrhagic Fever and The Spanish Conquest

by

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In the magazine, *Discover*, February 2006, an article appears entitled, *Megadeath in Mexico* by Bruce Stutz*. Basically, the author makes the case for the idea that it was not the actions of the Spanish Conquest nor the epidemics that followed upon the heels of that conquest that reduced the twenty million indigenous peoples of that land to around two million. It was a hemorrhagic viral fever, which the *Nahuas, Mexicas*, or *Tenochcas* called **Cocoliztli** in their language Nahuatl.

The author cites the work of a Mexican epidemiologist Rudolph Acuña-Soto. Stutz appears to err by spelling cocoliztli as cocolitzli. Such a transposition of sound [**tz** for **zt**] or phonemes is not uncommon throughout the development of any language; however, in this case it may simply be a typographical error. All source materials employ the word-concept **cocoliztli**, with the usual final “**tl**” phoneme so characteristic of Nahuatl.

*Consult also: “*Megadrought and Megadeath in 16th Century Mexico*”, by David W. Stahle, Department of Geosciences, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR, 72701 in: “Megadrought and Megadeath and Remedies in the Holocene”, August 29 – September 2, 2002, Department of Geography and Earth Sciences, Brunel University, Uxbridge, United Kingdom

According to Acuña-Soto, supposedly outbreaks of **zahuatl** [smallpox] occurred in 1520 and 1531, followed by epidemics in 1545 and 1576 that were caused by **cocoliztli** [hemorrhagic viral fever]. The traditional interpretation is that the conquering Spaniards brought with them virulent diseases that wiped out most of the indigenous population of Mexico during the Spanish Conquest.

“En este Barrio casi se acabó en 1576 por el terrible Cocoliztli o Viruela que los Españoles trajeron esta enfermedad, hizo muchos estragos en toda la nueva España, agregándose el Tepitonzáhuatl (el sarampión) o también conocida como la pequeña Lepra y el Matlalzáhuatl (el tifo con altas temperatutras).”

-Source: http://www.xochimilco.df.gob.mx/tradiciones/igle_monumen.html

Cocoliztli is often translated as smallpox or *viruela* in Spanish. Consider some word-concepts in Nahuatl that appear to be related to or suggest the word-concept cocoliztli.

| | |
|------------------------|--|
| <i>cocoliztli</i> | <i>sickness, affliction, ailment, pestilence, plague</i> |
| <i>Huey Cocoliztli</i> | <i>[the great pestilence]</i> |
| <i>cocos</i> | <i>affliction</i> |
| <i>cocolizcui</i> | <i>it becomes sick</i> |
| <i>cocolizcuiz</i> | <i>he will suffer</i> |
| <i>cocoliztl</i> | <i>sickness</i> |
| <i>cocolii</i> | <i>ailment, infection, sickness, pain, illness</i> |
| <i>cocoltic</i> | <i>curved, wavy</i> |
| <i>coltic</i> | <i>curved</i> |
| <i>izti</i> | <i>his claw, his talon, its claws</i> |
| <i>iztlac</i> | <i>its venom</i> |
| <i>izticolitic</i> | <i>curved of claw, having curved claws</i> <i>[note inversion of morphemes]</i> |
| <i>izticolitic</i> | <i>hook-clawed</i> |

Source:- R. Joe Campbell, Florentine Codex Vocabulary, www.mrs.umn.edu

The interpretation being forwarded by Acuña-Soto, reinforced by Stutz, diminishes the effects of the Spanish Conquest upon the indigenous population of Mexico, in spite of stated intentions to the contrary. It is always difficult to read the rewriting of history, especially when it concerns the history of the conquest of one people by another.

To discern what percentage of the indigenous population was annihilated due to smallpox [*cocoliztli*], typhus [*matlazahuatl*], measles [*zahuatl tepiton*], hemorrhagic fever [*huey cocliztli*], or directly as a result of the Spanish Conquest seems to be an impossible statistical task for this late date in history. One would surely need to consider the principal fact that the Spanish Conquest placed the indigenous population of Mexico in a dreaded and dire socioeconomic position that made it more susceptible to contracting diseases.

Another researcher, Dr. John S. Marr, the Chief Epidemiologist of the New York Department of Health, attempted to discern the possible epidemiological roots of the ten plagues of ancient Egypt. He has also written about cocolitzli [sic]. (Marr John S.; Kiracofe B.D. "*Was the Huey Cocolitzli a Hemorrhagic Fever?*" *Medical History*, 2000, (44):341-362.)

As I have been considering the linguistic correspondence between Nahuatl and ancient Egyptian, let me examine cocoliztli in the light of ancient Egyptian. For if Nahuatl and ancient Egyptian were related at one time, the study of phonemes and morphemes in either language might assist in shedding light on the meaning of cocoliztli itself. The case may be, as it appears from my research, that Nahuatl and ancient Egyptian are related, and that the use of the term cocoliztli may reflect a distinct interpretation other than simply a medical diagnosis of a particular disease (i.e., of hemorrhagic fever or smallpox). The roots of the word-concept, cocoliztli, may reflect social connotations as well.

This may be observed in the following linguistic comparisons of cocoliztli to possibly related meanings in ancient Egyptian. Remembering the transposition of sounds and symbols, cocoliztli may be pronounced as though it were *kokoliztli* or *kokolitsli*. Although the morphemic root would be distinct, the phonemic resemblance is valid as popular pronunciation goes.

| Nahuatl | Ancient Egyptian** | |
|---|--------------------|--|
| Cocoliztli [a disease, possibly hemorrhagic fever] | kha | to examine a patient by the touch [527a] |

| | |
|----------------|--|
| khaiu | slayers, conquerors [527b] |
| khaiu | slaughtering knives, slayers [527b] |
| khaut | the Divine Dead [527b] |
| khaa-t | dead body [528b] |
| khai-t | slaughter, massacre, ruin [528b] |
| khai-ti | slain, slaughter [528b] |
| Khaitiu | the gods who slaughter the Enemies of Ra and Osiris [529a] |
| khait | sickness, a kind of disease [529a] |
| khaut | general slaughter, massacre [571a] |
| kha-t | spulchre [571a] |
| khatt | the land of the dead [571a] |
| kha-t | dirt, disease, filth, sickness [571a] |
| kha-t | a dead body, corpse [570b] |
| kha-tiu | the dead in general, the damned, the slain [762a] |
| qaqa | a medicinal decoction [762a] |
| khaku | despicable, term of abuse [574b] |

| | | |
|----------------|----------------|--|
| | iat | (?) calamity, misfortune [142a] |
| | uit | embalmed body; dressing of the dead, embalmed [158a] |
| Zahuatl | aat-t | plague, disease, epidemic [27a] |
| | sa hemm | son of fever, i.e., a fever Patient [584b] |
| | satt | quaking, trembling, terror, fear [589a]; to tremble, to shake [589b] |
| | stau | palsy, quaking, paralysis [631a] |

The case may be that the very word *cocoliztli* remains unknown in its origin and the shades of meaning that it might reflect or represent. Also, remember that in the linguistic comparison between Nahuatl and ancient Egyptian, if one eliminates the letter “L” from the Nahuatl words, ancient Egyptian makes its appearance in many cases. Consider the following then:

cocoliztli [now, eliminate the letter “L” from this word-concept:]

cocoizti [kokoizti]

Also, in ancient Egyptian, the exact and precise pronunciation of the vowels remains an unknown fact. The linguistic correspondence of sounds of vowels and consonants between Nahuatl and ancient Egyptian might grant a comparative similitude between the “a” and the “o”. In this case, the phonemes of **kokoizti** are not that dissimilar from the word-concepts cited above for ancient Egyptian. I would not see a great difference between **koizti** and **khaiti**, for example, where the “zt” may be a variation of the letter “t”, as occurs in variations of ancient Egyptian as well.

Further consider an additional aspect of linguistic correspondence in regards to the word-concept “great” as in Huey Cocoliztli (the great pestilence):

Huey Cocoliztli
[the great pestilence]

Hua excess, greatly [470a]

Huey Zahuatl
[great smallpox]

Who is to say that the very word-concept, *cocoliztli*, did or did not enshroud different morphemes within its historical significance. Emphasis is given in the article under review to the fact that the word *cocoliztli* existed in the vocabulary of the Tenochcas, and for that reason the disease was theirs, and not that of the invading Spaniards. But, the word-concept itself may have had distinct meanings from that of simply identifying a particular kind of disease that afflicts the human body. Some of those meanings were undoubtedly related to the dire socioeconomic conditions imposed by the Spanish Conquest.

** Page numbers from, E. A. Wallis Budge, *An Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary*, Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1978, in two volumes.

Additional reading:

León, Nicolás, «*¿Qué era el Matlazáhualt y qué el Cocoliztli en los tiempos precolombinos y en la época hispana*», en E. Florescano y E. Malvido, *Ensayo sobre la historia de las epidemias en México*, tomo I. México D. F., Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social, 1982, pág. 388.

Somolinos D'Ardois, Germán, «*Hallazgo del manuscrito sobre el Cocoliztli, original de D. Francisco Hernández*», en E. Florescano y E. Malvido, *Ensayo sobre la historia de las epidemias en México*, tomo I, México, D.F., Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social, 1982, página 376.

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