Cocoliztli or Cocolitzli?

Indigenous Hemorrhagic Fever and The Spanish Conquest

by

Charles William Johnson

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 temperaturas).”

-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.

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

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 [cocolitzli], typhus [matlazahuatl], measles [zahuatl tepiton], hemorrhagic fever [huey cocolitzli], 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 cocolitzli 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 cocolitzli 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 cocolitzli 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, cocolitzli, may reflect social connotations as well.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nahuatl</th>
<th>Ancient Egyptian**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cocolitzli</td>
<td>kha to examine a patient by the touch [527a]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[a disease, possibly hemorrhagic fever]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
khaiu  slayers, conquerors [527b]

khaiu  slaying 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]
iati (?)  calamity, misfortune [142a]
uiti  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 kokoitzi 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 Cocoliztl (the great pestilence):
Who is to say that the very word-concept, cocoliztli, did or did not enshroud different morphemes within it 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.


Additional reading:

León, Nicolás, «¿Qué era el Matlazáhualt y qué el Cocoliztli en los tiempos precostumbreros 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.


©3 February 2006 Copyrighted by Charles William Johnson. All rights reserved.