



# **The Spanish Conquest of Mexico and the Role of La Llorona**

Goals 2000 - Partnerships for  
Educating Colorado Students

In Partnership with the **Denver Public Schools**  
and the **Metropolitan State College of Denver**

El Alma de la Raza Project



# The Spanish Conquest of Mexico and the Role of La Llorona

By Leni Arnett

Grades 6-7

Implementation Time  
for Unit of Study: 4-6 weeks

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Educating Colorado Students  
El Alma de la Raza Curriculum  
and Teacher Training Project

Loyola A. Martinez, Project Director

El Alma de la Raza Series

# The Spanish Conquest of Mexico and the Role of La Llorona

## Unit Concepts

- Sequence of events in the Spanish conquest of Mexico
- Geographical setting of the Aztec Empire
- Comparison of the economic, social, political, and cultural differences between Aztec and Spanish
- Comparison of historical and folklore accounts of La Llorona

## Standards Addressed in This Unit

### Geography

Students know how to use and construct maps, globes, and other geographic tools to locate and derive information about people, places, and environments. (G1)

Students know the physical and human characteristics of places and use this knowledge to define and study regions and their patterns of change. (G2)

Students understand how economic, political, cultural, and social processes interact to shape patterns of human populations, interdependence, cooperation, and conflict. (G4)

Students use appropriate technologies to obtain geographic information and data; to study and/or model geographic information or processes; and to access, process and communicate information related to the study of technology. (G7)

### History

Students understand the chronological organization of history and know how to organize events and people into major eras to identify and explain historical relationships. (H1)

Students understand that societies are diverse and have changed over time. (H3)

### Reading and Writing

Students read and understand a variety of materials. (RW1)

Students write and speak using formal grammar, usage, sentence structure, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. (RW3)

Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing. (RW4)

Students read to locate, select, and make use of relevant information from a variety of media, reference, and technological sources. (RW5)

Students read and recognize literature as a record of human experience. (RW6)

## Introduction

The conquest of civilizations by “stronger” groups is a common theme in the history of society. One of the most interesting and significant conquests was that of the Aztecs in the 1500s. Through this conquest, a mingling of cultures took place that produced a wealth of art, folktales, literature, and much more.

In the beginning, the Aztecs themselves came as conquerors of a new land. Venturing from a place they called Aztlan, a semi-mythical location, the Mexica or Aztecs arrived in the Valley of Mexico in the 13th century A.D. The Mexica wandered from city to city through this already populated area until A.D. 1325, when they founded the city of Tenochtitlán on an island in Lake Texcoco. For the next 105 years they worked to become the most important military and political power in Central Mexico. Then in 1519, this power came to a screeching halt at the hands of Hernán Cortés and the Spanish. Whether it was due to the overwhelming fire power of the Spanish, or the influence of Aztec religion, or the invaluable assistance of Doña Marina, one cannot tell. All three probably played a part in the downfall of the Aztecs and the birth of a new people.

Doña Marina has emerged as a significant figure both in history and folklore. She was a Nahuatl woman of noble birth, sold into slavery by her family. When she was fourteen, she was given away again, along with twenty other women, to Hernán Cortés. Able to speak both Nahuatl and Maya, Marina became a key figure to Cortés. She later became his mistress/wife and had a child by Cortés. When Cortés was ordered to bring his Spanish wife to the New World, Cortés had Marina married off to one of his soldiers, Don Juan de Jaramillo. Their son was sent back to Spain. Marina died a short time later, but her memory did not. Some see her as a traitor to her Aztec people, while many others see her as the tragic victim of circumstances.

Part of the tragedy of Doña Marina is that she lost her son, and like so many other women, has not rested since. According to legend, she continues to cry for her child. The image of La Llorona, the weeping woman, has brought together the Spanish and Aztec in folklore. The restless spirits of the women in these tales roam the world from California to Mexico City to Denver, Colorado in search of their children’s souls. It is here that part of Aztec culture still thrives.

## Implementation Guidelines

It is recommended that this unit be taught in 6th or 7th grade social studies or language arts class.

An ongoing activity involves reading aloud to the class (or if enough copies can be found, having the class read) one chapter a session of *The Legend of Llorona* by Rudolfo Anaya. Vocabulary should be highlighted, events outlined, people discussed, etc. The students should keep a reading log of what they hear in the story each day, their reactions, questions they have, and anything else they’d like to convey to the teacher. This is best done by keeping notes on the specifics of the book and writing in letter format their reactions and questions. The teacher should collect the reading logs or journals every other day and respond to each student’s letter. This log will be essential for Lesson 4. The teacher will need to go over pertinent vocabulary, events, and people.

## Instructional Materials and Resources

The following books and resources are required for implementing this unit as written.

Ongoing	<i>The Legend of La Llorona</i> by Rudolfo Anaya
Lesson 1	<i>The Aztecs</i> by Frances F. Berdan
Lesson 2	<i>The Aztecs</i> by Frances F. Berdan
Lesson 3	<i>The Aztecs</i> by Frances F. Berdan <i>The Broken Spears</i> by Miguel Leon-Portilla
Lesson 4	Local legal counsel <i>The Legend of La Llorona</i> by Rudolfo Anaya <i>Malinche: Slave Princess of Cortez</i> by Gloria Duran (Suggested)
Lesson 5	<i>La Llorona</i> a Barrio Publications Book <i>Mexican Ghost Tales of the Southwest</i> by Alfred Avila (Suggested) <i>Women Singing in the Snow</i> by Rebolledo <i>Palabras</i> (Suggested) <i>Weeping Woman</i> by Villanueva (Suggested) <i>The Weeping Woman: Encounters with La Llorona</i> , edited by Kraul (Suggested)

## Contents of Unit

Lesson 1	The Geography of Mexico The geographical settings of Aztec civilization and contemporary Mexico.
Lesson 2	Aztec and Spanish Ways of Life in the Early 1500s Comparing and contrasting an Aztec and a Spanish city.
Lesson 3	Spanish Conquest Creating a timeline of Spanish conquest that includes Doña Marina's role.
Lesson 4	Doña Marina Researching the life of Doña Maria and determining whether she was a victim of circumstance or a murderer and traitor. Holding a trial.
Lesson 5	Doña Marina and La Llorona Similarities and differences between Doña Maria and La Llorona. Turning the legend of La Llorona into a play.

# Lesson 1: The Geography of Mexico

## What will students be learning?

### STANDARD(S)

Students know how to use and construct maps, globes, and other geographic tools to locate and derive information about people, places, and environments. (G1)

Students know the physical and human characteristics of places and use this knowledge to define and study regions and their patterns of change. (G2)

Students use appropriate technologies to obtain geographic information and data; to study and/or model geographic information or processes; and to access, process, and communicate information related to the study of technology. (G7)

### BENCHMARK(S)

Students know how to use maps, globes and other geographic tools to acquire, process, and report information from a spatial perspective.

Students develop knowledge of Earth to locate people, places and environments.

Students know how and why people define regions.

Students use appropriate technologies to access, process, and communicate information relevant to geographic knowledge.

### OBJECTIVE(S)

Students will develop an understanding of the physical geography of Mexico.

## What will be done to help students learn this?

### INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Listening

Visualization

Mapping

Writing

Reporting

### PRELIMINARY LESSON PREPARATION

Teacher should review information on the geography of Mexico in chapter 1 of *The Aztec* by Frances F. Berden. Prepare a presentation, including discussion of physical features such as mountain ranges, volcanoes, lakes, plains, and oceans. Also discuss plants and animals indigenous to the region that made the area attractive for settlements. Make color overheads of pages 19 and 33 in this chapter and highlight features mentioned.

### ACTIVITIES

The teacher reads aloud chapter 1 from *The Shadow of Tlaloc*. This chapter provides a description, in story format, of the geographical area that the Aztecs came from and of the area where they later made their home. Then the teacher presents information on the geography of Mexico using overheads. After this presentation, students create their own physical maps of Mexico, including mountain ranges, present-day cities, historic sites, and oceans.

## Lesson 1 (cont.)

After students complete their maps, they log onto the Internet and access “Volcano World.” Then students go to the “Mexico” section. Students choose three volcanoes to learn about, and place the locations of these volcanoes on their map of Mexico. Then students write short summaries of the information provided in the site. Finally, students choose one of the volcanoes, locate it on an overhead for the class, and report on the information they gathered on the volcano.

An extension of this activity would be a mini-lesson on plate tectonics.

### RESOURCES/MATERIALS

chapter 1 in *The Aztecs* by Frances F. Berdan  
color overheads of pages 19 and 33 in *The Aztecs*  
blank map of Mexico  
blank overhead of map of Mexico  
Internet access

### ASSESSMENT

Completed physical map of Mexico and report on volcano to class.

## Lesson 2: Aztec and Spanish Ways of Life in the Early 1500s

### What will students be learning?

#### STANDARD(S)

Students understand that societies are diverse and have changed over time. (H3)

#### BENCHMARK(S)

Students understand the history of social organization in various societies.

#### OBJECTIVE(S)

Students will be able to compare the Aztec and Spanish ways of life.

### What will be done to help students learn this?

#### INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Lecture

Note taking

#### ACTIVITIES

In five research groups, students investigate and prepare 10–15 minute presentations comparing and contrasting the large cities of Spain and Tenochtitlán in the early 1500s, each group choosing one of the following areas:

- layout and amenities
- religion
- law
- family
- warfare

Make presentations to the class.

#### RESOURCES/MATERIALS

*The Aztecs* by Frances F. Berdan

#### ASSESSMENT

Accuracy and completeness of presentation.

# Lesson 3: Spanish Conquest

## What will students be learning?

### STANDARD(S)

Students understand the chronological organization of history and know how to organize events and people into major eras to identify and explain historical relationships. (H1)

### BENCHMARK(S)

Students use chronology to organize historical events and people.

### OBJECTIVE(S)

Students will sequence the events of the Spanish conquest.

## What will be done to help students learn this?

### INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Note taking

### PRELIMINARY LESSON PREPARATION

The teacher should read *The Broken Spears* by Miguel Leon-Portilla and *The Aztecs* by Frances F. Berdan. Pay close attention to the historical accounts of Doña Marina's assistance in the conquest.

### ACTIVITIES

The teacher lists on the board the important dates involved in the Spanish conquest of Mexico, beginning with 1517 and ending with 1521. While listening to the teacher relate the story of the conquest, students fill in the specific events that occurred on those dates.

### RESOURCES/MATERIALS

*The Broken Spears* by Miguel Leon-Portilla

*The Aztecs* by Frances F. Berdan

### ASSESSMENT

Students will complete a timeline of the Spanish conquest of Mexico.

# Timeline of the Spanish Conquest of Mexico

- 1517 Omens seen by the Aztecs  
Ball game at Texcoco
- 1518 Ships first seen in Gulf of Mexico  
First encounters of Indians and Spaniards along the east coast
- 1519 Cortés arrives on east coast on Good Friday, April 22; he calls it Veracruz  
Five months (approximately) are spent on the coast  
Move inland begins  
Battles with Tlaxcallans and Cholullans; eventually allies made  
The March to Tenochtitlán
- 1520 Moctezuma taken hostage by the Spaniards  
Moctezuma dies  
Spaniards try to leave; infamous Night of Sorrows
- 1521 Aztecs and the City enjoy a very short-lived feeling of good times because the Spanish had been driven out; by summer, widespread disease and hunger  
Spanish attack and capture the new ruler, Cuauhtemoc; 75-day siege ensues and Mexico falls to the Spanish

## Lesson 4: Doña Marina

### What will students be learning?

#### STANDARD(S)

Students read to locate, select, and make use of relevant information from a variety of media, reference, and technological sources. (RW5)

#### BENCHMARK(S)

Students paraphrase, summarize, organize, evaluate, and synthesize information.

#### OBJECTIVE(S)

Students will defend their opinion of Doña Marina using research.

Students will put Doña Marina on trial.

#### SPECIFICS

In the version of the legend presented in *The Legend of La Llorona* by Rudolfo A. Anaya, Doña Marina kills her twin sons by Cortés because he plans to take them back to Spain. After she sacrifices the children she is seen wandering the banks of the lake and thus has become La Llorona.

### What will be done to help students learn this?

#### INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Note taking

Categorizing

Research

#### ACTIVITIES

Students research Doña Marina's life, her role in the conquest, and the inference from Anaya's book that she killed her children. A good source of information on Doña Marina's life is the biography, *Malinche: Slave Princess of Cortez* by Gloria Duran. Students divide the results of their research into two categories: one presenting Doña Marina as the victim of circumstance and the other as a murderer and traitor. They write a one-page report expressing their opinion on this issue and defending it with their research.

Then the class puts Doña Marina on trial. The teacher assigns students to defense and prosecution.

#### RESOURCES AND MATERIALS

*The Legend of La Llorona* by Rudolfo A. Anaya

*Malinche: Slave Princess of Cortez* by Gloria Duran

#### ASSESSMENT

Student reports and participation in trial.

# Lesson 5: Doña Marina and La Llorona

## What will students be learning?

### STANDARD(S)

Students read and understand a variety of materials. (RW1)

Students read and recognize literature as a record of human experience. (RW6)

### BENCHMARK(S)

Students adjust reading strategies for a variety of purposes.

Students read literature to understand places, events, people, and vocabulary, both familiar and unfamiliar.

### OBJECTIVE(S)

Students will understand how and why Doña Marina and La Llorona have become associated.

## What will be done to help students learn this?

### INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Reading

Writing

Acting

Discussion

Compare and contrast

### PRELIMINARY LESSON PREPARATION

The teacher should read chapter 3 in *Women Singing in the Snow* by Tey Diana Rebolledo. This text presents Doña Marina and La Llorona as two separate people, but also provides information on the literature that brings the two together.

### ACTIVITIES

The teacher reads aloud the poem “La Llorona” in *La Llorona: 25 Lloronas of Abelardo*, p. 3. Discuss the poem and the last events in *The Legend of La Llorona* by Rudolfo A. Anaya, where Doña Marina and La Llorona become one. Other stories that could be read and discussed include: “La Llorona” and “La Llorona of the Moon” in *Mexican Ghost Tales of the Southwest* by Alfred Avila, “La Llorona/Weeping Woman” in *Weeping Woman* by Alma Villanueva, and “La Llorona” in *Palabras*, pp. 9–12.

Students bring in their own version of the myth or one they find by another author and share with the class. Teacher or students could invite parents and community members to share their stories of La Llorona with the class.

After several of the stories have been read, students, in groups of 4–6, take a version of the legend, write a screenplay, and produce and perform the legend for the class.

## Lesson 5 (cont.)

### RESOURCES AND MATERIALS

*La Llorona: 25 Lloronas of Abelardo*

*The Legend of La Llorona* by Rudolfo A. Anaya

*Weeping Woman* by Alma Luz Villanueva (Optional)

*The Weeping Woman: Encounters with La Llorona*, edited by Kraul (Optional)

*Mexican Ghost Tales of the Southwest* by Alfred Avila (Optional)

Internet access

### ASSESSMENT

Students will dramatize the La Llorona legend and present to the class.

# Unit Assessment

## How will students demonstrate proficiency?

### PERFORMANCE TASK

Students will write a three-page paper using the five-paragraph essay format. They will need to use the following thesis statement:

With the conquest of Mexico, the Spanish affected the geography of Mexico and changed Aztec culture and the life of Doña Marina.

The paper needs to include: a correctly constructed title page; a minimum of four correctly used work citations; at least one map, graph, or illustration; correct spelling, punctuation and sentence construction; and a correctly formatted bibliography.

Paragraph 1: Introduce the topic and state the thesis statement.

Paragraph 2: The Spanish conquest of Mexico affected the geography of Mexico.

Paragraph 3: The culture of the Aztecs was changed by the Spanish conquest of Mexico.

Paragraph 4: Doña Marina's life changed in response to the Spanish conquest.

Paragraph 5: Conclude your paper and restate the above thesis statement.

### SCORING RUBRIC

4. The paper includes a correctly constructed title page; is correctly formatted; contains a minimum of four citations; uses correct spelling, punctuation, and sentence construction; provides supporting material for the thesis statement; uses a map, graph, or illustration to enhance the paper; and contains a correctly formatted bibliography.
3. The paper includes a correctly constructed title page; is correctly formatted; contains a minimum of three citations; has a maximum of three errors in spelling, punctuation, and sentence construction; provides supporting material for the thesis statement; uses a map, graph, or illustration to enhance the paper; and contains a correctly formatted bibliography.
2. The paper includes a correctly constructed title page; is correctly formatted; contains a minimum of two citations; has a maximum of six errors in spelling, punctuation, and sentence construction; provides unclear supporting material for the thesis statement; uses a map, graph, or illustration to enhance the paper; and contains a correctly formatted bibliography.
1. The paper includes a correctly constructed title page; is correctly formatted; contains a minimum of one citation; has a maximum of 12 errors in spelling, punctuation, and sentence construction; provides unclear supporting material for the thesis statement; uses a map, graph, or illustration to enhance the paper; and contains a correctly formatted bibliography.

## Bibliography

- Anaya, Rudolfo A. *The Legend of La Llorona*. Berkeley: Tonatiuh-Quinto Sol International, 1994.  
This is a great adolescent version of the Doña Marina story that also shows the transformation of Marina into La Llorona.
- Avila, Alfred. *Mexican Ghost Tales of the Southwest*. Houston: Pinata Press, 1994.  
This is a wonderful collection of ghost stories. There are two that specifically deal with the La Llorona theme. One in particular, “La Llorona of the Moon,” deals with the theme of the witch or goblin coming to get a little girl if she is not good.
- Berdan, Frances F. *The Aztecs*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989.  
This text provides a detailed look at Aztec society prior to and after Spanish conquest at a level appropriate for most school-age children. The author has spent time in Mexico and written several books on the Aztec society.
- Duran, Gloria. *Malinche: Slave Princess of Cortez*. Hamden: Linnet Books, 1993.  
This is a very readable biography of Doña Marina and provides background to her life. It does not touch on her becoming known as La Llorona, but will give the student and teacher a deeper insight into Doña Marina’s life.
- La Llorona: 25 Lloronas of Abelardo*. Arvada: Barrio Publications, 1992.  
This is an anthology of local poetry and stories, including a poem presenting Doña Marina as La Llorona.
- Leon-Portilla, Miguel. *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1962.  
This text provides a very interesting contrast to Eurocentric accounts of the Spanish conquest. It gives a different perspective of Doña Marina’s role than that found in contemporary adolescent literature.
- Messinger Cypess, Sandra. *La Malinche in Mexican Literature: From History to Myth*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991.  
This book provides some information on Doña Marina and La Llorona becoming one.
- Palabras: A Magazine of Writing from La Academia*. Denver: La Academia, May 1995.  
Pages 9–12 include several versions of the La Llorona legend.
- Rebolledo, Tey Diana. *Women Singing in the Snow: A Cultural Analysis of Chicana Literature*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1995.  
This text provides background on the development of Chicana literature. Chapter 3 specifically deals with the La Llorona–Doña Marina association.
- Reck, Gregory. *In the Shadow of Tlaloc*.  
Chapter 1 provides a very good introduction to the geographical setting of the Aztec people.
- Villanueva, Alma Luz. *Weeping Woman: La Llorona and Other Stories*. Tempe: Bilingual Press, 1994.  
This is a great collection of stories, including a very interesting version of La Llorona.

## About the Author

Leni Arnett was born in Denver, Colorado and raised in the mountain town of Dillon. Leni encountered many different people and ideas that shaped her goal of working with a diverse group of people. Upon graduating from Summit County High School, Leni moved to Boulder, Colorado to pursue an education in anthropology. Leni graduated from the University of Colorado with a bachelors degree in anthropology and archeology. Her focus in anthropology was on Latin America and the southwest United States.

Leni has worked for the Denver Public Schools since 1984. Her first assignment was at Cole Middle School, where she found a wealth of diversity. However, after eight years of teaching she became restless and yearned to try something new. In 1992 she made a short-lived career change, working with a neurologist. It didn't take long for her to realize that her true calling was teaching and she returned to the classroom in 1995.

She has spent 12 of her 13 years of teaching in middle school, and is now working with both middle and high school students in the unique setting of the Denver School of the Arts. She teaches geography and American history, integrating the arts and academics.