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Miguel León-Portilla

Victorious Writing

The great *tlamatini* (wise man in Náhuatl), historian, anthropologist, ethnographer, translator, philosopher, and humanist Miguel León-Portilla died the night of October 1 at the age of 93. León-Portilla (Mexico City, 1926-2019) was one of the wisest and most affable and generous men of contemporary Mexico. A committed defender of our country's first people's cultures, a prolific researcher, the recipient of honorary doctorates from many institutions worldwide, he was, above all, a good person and one of the most widely read authors by students in Mexico and abroad.

His life was fueled by an unceasing quest for knowledge and he drank from that fountain equally in Náhuatl, Latin, Greek, Spanish, English, French, German, Italian, and Portuguese. His work directly continued that begun by Ángel María Garibay Kintana (1892-1967), who he considered his mentor in his vocation and task of recovering and disseminating the ancient words of the Nahua peoples.

He studied at Los Angeles's Loyola University, where he graduated in art in 1951, and at the UNAM, where he received his doctorate in philosophy in 1956.

Between 1955 and 1963, he was deputy director and then director of the Inter-American Indigenist Institute (INII). Beginning in 1963, he was the director of the UNAM's Institute for Historical Research for a decade and was appointed the chronicler of Mexico City between 1975 and 1976. In 1995, he was inducted into the United States National Academy of Sciences in the special area of anthropology and history. He was also a member of the Mexican Academies of Language and of History, the National College, and the Cuban Academy of Language.

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DGCs, UNAM

Among his most important and best-known works are, undoubtedly, *La filosofía náhuatl* (Nahua Philosophy) (1956); *La visión de los vencidos* (The Vision of the Vanquished) (1959)—the most widely circulated of all UNAM publications, which has been translated into more than 15 languages—; *Los antiguos mexicanos a través de sus crónicas y cantares* (Ancient Mexicans through Their Chronicles and Songs) (1961); *El reverso de la Conquista* (The Reverse Side of the Conquest) (1964); *Trece poetas del mundo azteca* (Thirteen Poets from the Aztec World) (1967); *Literaturas indígenas de México* (Indigenous Literatures of Mexico) (1992); *Quince poetas del mundo náhuatl* (Fifteen Poets of the Nahua World) (1994); and *La tinta negra y roja. Antología de poesía náhuatl* (Red and Black Ink. Anthology of Náhuatl Poetry) (2008).

Fortunately, he received many honors. Among the most memorable may be the honorary doctorates given by the San Andrés Greater University of Bolivia (1994) and by his alma mater, the UNAM (1998), as well as the honor bestowed on him in his hospital bed last September 12 when the Ministry of Public Education gave him the first Nezhualcóyotl Prize.

During a 2016 honors ceremony at UNAM, he said with characteristic humor that he wasn't afraid of death because, "We don't know when I'll die. I have worked and helped; I think I haven't been much of a bastard. If there is a God, my fate won't be bad."

Another trait that identified Don Miguel León-Portilla was his constant defense of the humanities. He thought that they allowed people to overcome their natural fragility, build imposing works, make great discoveries and inventions, and create beauty and have the ability to enjoy it; all of this at the same time that past technocratic, neo-liberal governments waged a ferocious siege against them, questioning the importance of studying, teaching, and funding them.

Outstanding among the multiple teachings he leaves as a legacy to current and coming generations are his love for the cultures and linguistic heritage of the first peoples, as well as the collective responsibility for preserving and disseminating them. From his perspective, in the twenty-first century, we are facing in more than one sense a clear,

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decisive dilemma: many languages either die or are saved. "Some linguists say that of the more than 5 000 existing languages in the world, only 100 will survive. I say that there could be many more; it depends on us, we who are teachers and to a certain extent, linguists, those of us who are interested in the history of our country and recognize it as a treasure." He concluded —and quite rightly so— that, "When a language dies, it is a tragedy for humanity."¹ **MM**

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Notes

- 1** Merry MacMasters, "León-Portilla urge al gobierno aumentar apoyo a la educación," *La Jornada*, October 12, 2016, p. 4, <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2016/10/12/cultura/a04n1cul>.

You can listen to the course "La riqueza de la literatura náhuatl" (The Wealth of Nahuatl Literature), given by León-Portilla in August 2014 at the Carlos Chávez Room, at the following web site: <https://descargacultura.unam.mx/autor/León-Portilla,%20Miguel>.