Califia and her Two-Spirit Sisters

*Stories Behind the Myth of California*

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In 1524, Hernán Cortés was at the peak of his fame and power. Three years earlier through guile, luck, and violence he had crushed the Aztec Empire. The Holy Roman Emperor, King Carlos V, appointed him governor, captain general, and chief justice of “New Spain of the Ocean Sea.” But his penchant for defying orders and making enemies—and, indeed, his impudence toward the king himself—had weakened his standing. He yearned to undertake new conquests in lands north of the Aztecs, but the Crown had sent a rival instead to colonize the region. So on October 15, Cortés sat down and penned a letter to the king complaining bitterly of being the victim of conspiracies and dangling alluring promises of the new conquests he was prepared to undertake—and the riches he would bring—for the Spanish Empire.

Most tantalizing was a report from his trusted lieutenant, Gonzalo de Sandoval. In 1522, he had sent Sandoval into western Mexico with instructions to “visit the towns and people of those provinces and to bring to me all the reports and secrets of the land that he might learn.” Sandoval travelled as far as the shores of the “South Sea”—the Pacific Ocean—where he founded the city of Colima before

This article is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Michael Tsosie, a member of the Colorado River Indian Tribes (Mohave), who discovered the image of the Quechan two-spirit woman in 1996 and generously shared it with me, along with his insights and his friendship.
proceeding north along the coast. Reaching the town of Cihuatlán in the present state of Jalisco, the “lords” of the province give him a “report,”

in which there is affirmed to be an island inhabited by women without any men, although at certain times they are visited by men from the main land; and if the women bear female children they are protected, but if males they are driven from their society. This island is ten day’s journey from that province and many have gone there and seen it. They also tell me it is very rich in pearls and gold; respecting which I shall labor to obtain the truth, and to give your Majesty a full account of it.

And indeed, Sandoval had returned with pearls in hand.

Cortés wasted no time. Even before he wrote to the king, he dispatched his cousin to Colima with instructions to look for “a district inhabited by women without men,” where “in the matter of reproduction, these women follow the practices of the Amazons described in the istoria antiguas.”

Cortés’ letter was calculated to get the royal court’s attention. That an island of riches inhabited by women who lived without men might exist was not a new fantasy for the Spaniards. The Greek myth of a tribe of women, the Amazons, living on the margins of the civilized world had persisted through the Middle Ages. At the time the Spaniards arrived in the New World, an island of women was the subject of one of the most popular novels in the history of Spanish literature.

First published in 1510, Las Sergas de Esplandian (translated as The Labors of the Very Brave Knight Esplandian) was the second of two romantic potboilers written by Garci Rodriguez de Montalvo. Drawing on old medieval chivalry tales, Las Sergas de Esplandian was a runaway bestseller.

Over the course of 21 chapters, Montalvo gives an account of “an island named California...which was inhabited by black women, without a single man among them, and that they lived in the manner of Amazons. The island everywhere abounds with gold and precious stones....Whenever a man came to the island he was promptly killed and eaten.” Its ruler
was a queen named Califia.

In fact, stories of New World Amazons had been making their way back to Spain well before *Las Sergas de Esplandian* was published. Columbus relayed reports of an island of women engaged in men’s pursuits in his official account of his first voyage. It is quite possible that these reports inspired Montalvo. In any case, they kept coming. In 1517, while sailing along the shoreline of Cozumal, Juan de Grijalva's expedition found “a tower on a tip of the land that is said to be inhabited by women who live without men.” When Cortés departed from Cuba to meet his destiny in Mexico the following year, his instructions included, among other things, “to get hold of an informant who will give you news about other islands…and you will also inquire where and in what direction are the Amazons.”

The soldiers with Cortés knew Montalvo’s books well. Bernal Díaz, who chronicled Cortés exploits, recalled how at first sight of the great city of Tenochtitlán the Spaniards “could not help remarking to each other, that all these buildings resembled the fairy castles we read of in Amadis de Gaul” (Montalvo’s first novel).

Meanwhile, back in Spain, Cortés’ letter backfired. The crown was certainly interested in pearls, gold, and new territories, Amazons or no, but authorization to undertake their conquest was not forthcoming. Meanwhile, Cortés was called away to suppress a revolt in Honduras. When he returned to Mexico in 1526 he found himself mired in controversies, largely of his own making. He was suspended from the office of governor and banished from Mexico City. Then his archenemy, Nuño Beltrán de Guzmán, accused him of poisoning his rivals. Cortés hurriedly left for Spain to defend his name. When he returned in 1530, he was still shorn of the title of governor, but now he had a royal contract in hand to find the islands of the South Sea.

Meanwhile, events on the ground had overtaken him.

**On** December 21, 1529, Nuño de Guzmán, set out with a force of more than 300 conquistadors and some eight thousand Nahua allies into the lands west of New Spain—to find the pearls and gold of the Amazons. The expedition was,
in the words of one historian, a genocidal enterprise. Guzmán attacked the natives’ villages, stole their food, razed and burned their dwellings, and tortured their leaders to make them reveal the location of their riches. In July 1530, he had reached Omitlán on the western Mexican coast, where he wrote the king, “I shall go to find the Amazons, which some say dwell in the Sea, some in an arm of the Sea, and that they are rich, and accounted of by the people for goddesses.” Guzmán ravaged his way up the coast until he reached Cihuatlán, where Sandoval had heard of an island of women, gold, and pearls; but the only women Guzmán found were cowering in fear and clutching their children; the men had fled to the mountains. There were no pearls or gold.

Such news might have discouraged another man, but Guzmán’s dénouement only emboldened Cortés. Now it was his chance to find the island of women and their riches. Between 1532 and 1539, he mounted no less than five expeditions to that end, all financed at his own expense, all ending in disaster and disappointment.

In 1532, he sent two ships under Diego Hurtado Mendoza into the seas off the coast of western Mexico “to find out whether the natives were adorned with gold, pearls or precious stones.” One ship mutinied; the second disappeared without a trace. The following year, he sent two more ships under Diego de Becerra to find Mendoza. Again, a revolt broke out; Becerra was killed. When the mutineers turned back to Mexico, they came upon an island they named Santa Cruz, where “according to all accounts, there were fine pearl fisheries.” Its inhabitants, however, were a “savage tribe of Indians,” who attacked and killed the landing party. As the survivors straggled back to Mexico, stories of the newfound island of pearls reached Cortés who, in the words of Bernal Díaz, “felt a great temptation to visit the above-mentioned pearl island.”

The conquistador now took matters in his own hands. In the spring of 1535, he set sail with three ships and 380 soldiers and settlers for the island of Santa Cruz. On May 3, he landed at present day La Paz, claimed the land for the king, and founded a town. Then two of his ships ran aground. Awaiting their return, Cortés ran out of supplies, and his men began starving to death. According to Bernal Díaz, in order not
witness these miseries, he left Santa Cruz—to discover other lands—and “came upon California, which is a bay.”

The men Cortés abandoned at Santa Cruz clung on for almost two years, a miserable colony on the coast of a barren peninsula where there were neither gold nor pearls, let alone a queen named Califia. It took one more expedition in 1539, under Francisco de Ulloa, up the coasts of Baja California to convince Cortés of that fact.

By now he had expended 300,000 pesos of his own funds. In the words of one Spanish historian, “No man ever wasted money on such enterprises with so much zeal.” Hoping for royal reimbursement, he left for Spain in 1541—and never returned to Mexico.

Whether Cortés himself called his discovery “California” is uncertain. The name first appears in documentary records in 1541. The Spaniards continued to apply it to the landscape as they steadily extended their empire northward, first to denote a bay, then an island, then a peninsula thought to be an island, and finally to the vast region facing the Pacific Coast from Cabo San Lucas to the forty-second parallel.

In the histories Euro-Americans have written about Spain in America, the naming of California is often cited as a case in point: how the romanticism, superstition, gullibility, and greed that drove Spanish conquest doomed their empire to a long demise and in its aftermath a string of failed states mired in backwardness, enthralled by Catholicism, beset with dictators.

It is true, the Spaniards entered the New World with rampant imaginations. But there are other voices, outside Western discourse, Anglo or Hispanic, that whisper between the lines of the texts conquistadors and historians have written: that of the indigenous American people. To hear them we have to retrace the steps of Sandoval back to Cihuatlán in 1522 and ask: what did the “lords” of that region (perhaps the Purépecha Indians) tell him?

On close reading, Sandoval’s account has only two elements of Montalvo’s story: that somewhere nearby there was an island “inhabited by women without any men” and that the island was very rich in pearls and gold. There is no mention of warrior women or a queen.

Apparently, native Mexicans had their own traditions about women who lived without men. These may have reminded the Spaniards of their own mythologies, but were distinct from them.
We might begin by noting that “cihuatlán,” a compound of the Nahuatl words *zihua* and *tlán*, literally means “place of women.” Even more revealing is an account from an anonymous soldier who accompanied Guzmán in 1530. Many women from Cihuatlán, he states, very different from any seen before, were taken prisoner. Speaking through an interpreter, they said they had arrived by sea, and “in ancient times they kept the custom of having no husbands...but they received neighboring men, from time to time, for intercourse, and women who bore sons buried them alive while keeping their daughters to bring them up.” At present, however, they no longer killed their male infants but raised them until they were ten, then gave them to their fathers.

In other words, the stories of women who lived without men were stories told by the native women of Cihuatlán.

This is consistent with the argument of Danna Rojo in *Return to Aztlan*. In attributing the Spaniards’ will to conquest to romantic tales they brought with them to the New World, Anglo-American historians have overlooked the extent to which native discourse informed their quests. For indigenous people throughout central Mexico, the region to the north of the Aztec Empire was an origin point, where there was another city as marvelous as Tenochtitlán from which their ancestors had come—as documented in numerous surviving native codices, in both pictures and text. Cortés, among others, knew these sources, and the native informants he questioned knew them as well. Thus, the Spaniards, along with the thousands of Indian auxiliaries that joined their expeditions, were retracing the ancestral Mexica migration.

The people of Cihuatlán, as everywhere, took their mythologies to be true stories. What a myth of an alternative society of women without men represented to them—what cultural tensions or memories it expressed or mediated—we can only guess at this distance. But in having such traditions, the people of Cihuatlán were not alone.

In 1605, Fray Francisco de Escobar wrote an account of his journey with Don Juan de Oñate from northern New Mexico to the mouth of the Colorado River. It is as fantastic a tale as any told in the long history of Spanish discovery narratives. Throughout
the region, the native people—ancestors of the Yuman-speaking tribes who live there today—told him stories of “monstrosities” that he could hardly believe; and yet, he mused, “since so many and different people...testify to them, they cannot lack foundation.” There were stories of a nation of men whose penises were so long they wrapped them four times around their waists; a nation whose people had only one foot; another, “not far from the last,” who slept underwater; another in trees; yet another that lived on the odor of food alone—and all these “nations” lay along a river not far away. But Escobar saves the best for last. Just a few days’ journey distant, he was told, there was an island:

*The principle person obeyed by the people who lived on the island was a woman whom they call Çiñaca Cohota, which signifies or means “principal woman” or “woman-chief [capitana].” From all these Indians we learned that she was a giantess, and that on the island she had only a sister and no other person of her race, which must have died out with them.*

Another account three decades later gives the island a name: Ziñogaba. The myth of the Amazons was alive again. In 1608, Father Antonio de Ascensión, who had been on an expedition that had sailed north as far as Monterey, wrote a letter to the king with an account of an Amazon island redolent with allusions to Montalvo. Quoting a report from one of Oñate’s officers, who had contact with the natives, Ascensión wrote:

*They also made signs that in an island nearby in the middle of the sea there was a noted large town, of which an Amazon Indian, half giantess, who wears on her breast a very precious plate of pearls and who is accustomed to take them ground up in her drinks, is queen. These Indians said there were many pearls in that sea....the greatest quantity being found around the island of the Amazon Queen.*

As for silver, Escobar adds, “They say that the Amazon Queen possesses it.” It comes from “the land of California.”
By 1656, an Isle de Gigante had found its way onto an early French map, which locates it between the “Island of California” and the coast of western Mexico, and north of the Rio del Norte—the Colorado River—misplaced several hundred miles south of its actual location.

Again, we have a text in which the words of native people are quoted, interpreted, and perhaps misunderstood altogether by Europeans who did not speak their languages nor understand their worldviews. Yet, what makes these stories intriguing is that the traditions of the Yuman-speaking tribes of the Colorado River, recorded nearly three centuries later by anthropologists, not only tell of powerful mythological warrior women, but of a social role for individuals born female who were both warriors and shamans—a role now termed “two spirit.”

Gender diversity was a notable feature of Yuman societies. In 1540 Hernándo de Alarcón observed that “there were among these Indians three or four men dressed like women.” These were male two spirits, called *elha* among the Cocopa, *elxa’* among the Quechan, *alyha:* among the Mohave, and *éályaxai* among the Maricopa. A role for females who expressed male traits and mastered male skills is documented as well. They were called *warhameh* in Cocopa, *kwerhame* in Quechan, *hwame:* in Mohave, and *kwiraxameh* in Maricopa. They engaged in men’s work—hunting, farming, and war. They typically dressed as did men and married women. Throughout the region, male and female two-spirits were credited with mythological origins and certain spiritual powers.

The mythology of the Tipai (Kamia) tribe prominently features a female two spirit. In this myth, the god Mastamho creates humans at a place called Wikami. He assigns...
them to four tribes and instructs them to disperse. The Tipai migrate south with the Quechan, then go on alone to the Salton Sea. Other groups continue west to become the Ipai, a people who have no seeds and live by hunting and gathering alone.

At this point, Mastamho sends a figure called Warharmi (cognate with the Cocopa word for a female two spirit, *warhameh*), who is described as “half-man, half-woman,” and a pair of male twins collectively named Madkwahomai. Together, they bring seeds and agriculture to the Tipai. As they travel along the Colorado River, they collect feathers for headdresses and then paint their faces for war. When they arrive in the Imperial Valley, the Tipai flee except for one woman who marries one of the twins. The twins then give the Tipai clans weapons and instruction in their use.

Here the two-spirit goddess Warharmi is a culture-bearer, who brings the arts of agriculture and war. Figures from other Yuman tribes share traits with her. A Havasupai goddess provides seeds. The Mohave Nyohaiva is a woman warrior associated with twin gods. She instructs the people in the use of war feathers and paint, and institutes a war dance led by four *alyha*: male two spirits.

Other Yuman goddesses, like the one Escobar was told of, are said to live in the ocean, usually in the west: the Mohave Kwa’akuya-inyohave, or Old Woman of the West, and the Yavapai Komwida-pokuwia. As for the name of the island, Ziñogaba, the anthropologist Alfred Kroeber speculated that it was a contraction of the Mohave terms *thenya’aka*, “woman,” and *ava*, “house,” while Ciñaca-cohota is “woman chief.” In other words, despite the fantastic nature of his overall account, in this instance Escobar appears to have accurately recorded a native term.

Reports from the 1890s mention a Quechan *kwerhame*, or female two spirit, who was married to a woman. She may be the figure in the photograph below taken in same period. It is the only known photograph of a traditional Native American female two spirit. It depicts an imposing woman, hand on hip, wearing only a man’s breechcloth and the bow guards of a warrior on her wrists. The massive amount of shell bead jewelry she is wearing (which perhaps a conquistador might have imagined to be pearls) indicates wealth and high status.
On the Great Seal of the State of California a martial goddess gazes serenely upon a pastoral scene. The snow-tipped peaks of the Sierra Nevada rise in the distance. Below is a placid San Francisco Bay, dotted with ships moored at its islands; a diminutive grizzly bear lumbering at the goddess’s feet. She is Minerva, the Roman goddess of war and wisdom; on her shield is the face of the man-killing ogre, Medussa.

In light of the origin of “California,” one might wonder why the state’s seal does not give pride of place to its eponym, the Queen of the Amazons. But then one remembers: Califia—and her two-spirit sisters—were dark-skinned.

Perhaps the time has come to replace the myth of California with a bit of history—and honor the complex origins of its name and its links to the female two spirits who flourished in America long before Garci Rodriguez de Montalvo penned his romantic fantasy of Amazons, islands, and gold.
Sources


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Images

Dourado, Fernando Vaz. Portulanatlas (Alte Welt und Terra Nova), chart XII, Pazifik. BSB Cod.icon. 137, Goa, 1580. urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb00003364-8. Duardo’s fanciful map depicts the western coast of Mexico with naked Amazons cavorting in vicinity of Colima, the city founded by Gonzalo de Sandoval in 1523. As Rojo points out, the pair of blue, neuron-like depictions of interconnected lakes evoke an early map of Tenochtitlan attributed to Cortés as well as images in traditional codices representing that city and the original home of the ancient Mexicans.

Engraved portrait of Hernando Cortés, ca. 1800-1850.

Drawing in the Codex Lienzo de Tlaxcala, c. 1550, depicting Guzmán's forces as they attack the Tarascan (Perumpechan) home city of Michoacan (Michuaca). The Spaniards ride horses and are armed with swords and lances, while a war dog precedes them. The Tlaxcalans at the bottom are armed with obsidian-bladed swords. On the right are Tarascan archers, and below them a fallen warrior whose body has been hacked into pieces. From Wikimedia Commons.


Nicolas Sanson, Le Nouveau Mexique, et La Floride, map. Paris 1656.

Photograph of Quechan kwerhame, George Wharton James Collection, Southwest Museum, neg. no. N5506. This photograph was first published in Roscoe, Changing Ones.