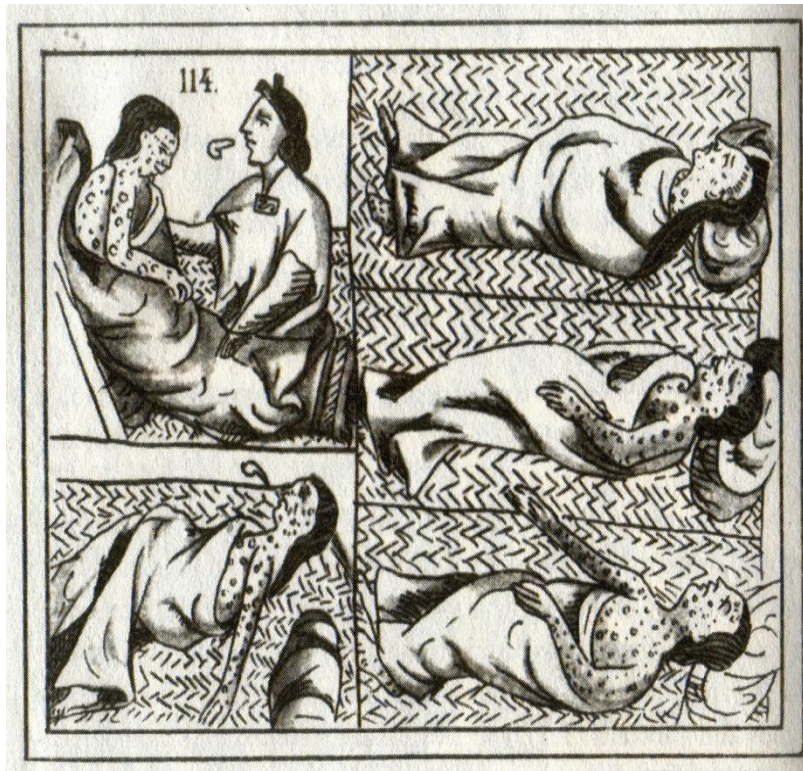


DEMOGRAPHIC COLLAPSE IN THE NEW WORLD: ERUPTIVE FEVER AND CONTAGION IN THE 15TH CENTURY AMERICAS

In the same way the bubonic plague and the Black Death transformed the European landscape in the 15th Century, contagion and epidemic wrought unprecedented demographic changes in 16th Century Americas. The Black Death had come to Europe through military contact and coastal trade route with civilizations from across the Asian continent. Likewise, the Europeans introduced varying diseases with deadly consequences to the New world after her navigational breakthrough in 1492. This unprecedented contact of new cultures brought about the exchange of diseases, the Amerindian natives of the New World receiving smallpox, malaria, measles, mumps, typhus, leprosy and other diseases from the Europeans. By the same token, the European conquistadors got syphilis from the contacts with the Amerindians. Available evidence reiterates that these newly exchanged diseases were instrumental in the conquest of the New World by the European conquistadors.

Supporting the above is the case of Hernan Cortes' contact with the Aztec civilization and the ravaging biological warfare that was unleashed on the native population. As attested by a Nahuatl poem, *The Broken Spear* (1528), the natives' natural and physical defensive mechanism proved futile in the defence of their civilization against the European invaders. The natives "pounded our hands in despair" as their ancestral city was "lost and dead." The European biological warfare proved superior to the "shields" of the native warriors or the "dry twigs," "salt grasses," "lizards," "rats" and "worms" experimented on in the bid to cure the epidemic. It was indeed this bacteriological advantage that gave Cortes a seamless victory that required less human power to subdue the people. During Cortes' victorious entrance, the "walls are reddened with blood. Worms are swarming in the streets and plazas." This imagery mirrors the devastation of the contagious disease introduced by the European. These diseases would wound up decimating over 75% of the population of the New World, and in turn making the European conquistadors the undisputed overlords in the Americas.



A 16th-century Florentine Codex (c.1540-1585) showcasing the helplessness of traditional medical practitioners against the Smallpox epidemic.

It is important to stress that due to the low bacteriological understanding of the nature of the epidemics, religious and superstitious explanations attained prominence. Since the indigenous people of Amerindia were the worst affected demography, the Europeans seeing this felt that God was punishing the "ungodly" natives of Amerindia. On the other hand, the Amerindians felt that their gods had forsaken them and were unleashing their wrath on them. This realization prompted the native to adopt a biological approach as against their earlier spiritual approach in their effort to reclaim their land. The Amerindians did this by trying to infect the Europeans with the disease by kneading infected blood into the latter's food and by immersing infected corpses into the water well. But all these proved futile as the Europeans were resistant to these biological attacks and had developed immunity to the pathogens before coming to the New World.

It must be admitted that the exchanged diseases had tremendous impact and enriched the demography of the Americas. Firstly, it prompted the reinvention of traditional medicine as the people sought for new ways out of their health predicaments. Again and maybe perhaps due to the conquest and depopulation of the New World, interracial sexual relationships between the Europeans and the natives began to emerge. These sexual contacts produced hybrid children known as Mestizos who inherited their parents' immunity. In addition, sexual contacts with the conquistadors meant that the Europeans contracted syphilis. What this suggests is that even in the presence of the epidemic, people in the New World still managed a semblance of their normal lives. A more interesting comparison to this is the global outbreak of COVID-19 and the way the world is gradually adjusting to the "New Normal".

Equally significant and arguably the most intriguing consequence of the decimation of the Amerindian population by European imported diseases was the repopulation of the New World with slaves from Africa. These imported black slaves enriched the cultural and bacteriological diversity of the emerging European colonies in the New World. More so, these African slaves assisted the European in extracting the riches of the New World.