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The Aztecs: A Pre-Columbian History

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Introduction

The Aztecs of ancient Mexico are generally the most widely known of all pre-Columbian peoples of the Americas. The dramatic and heroic story of their conquest and eventual destruction at the hands of the Spanish Conquistadores and the rediscovery in 1790 of the Piedra del Sol, the Sun Stone or Aztec Calendar, are known throughout the world. In 1978, when municipal workers laying underground electrical cable near the Cathedral in the center of Mexico City discovered a huge stone portrait of Coyolxauhqui, the rebellious sister of Huitzilopochtli, the find ignited a serious interest in Mexican archeology and the study of Mesoamerica history. Hidden under the soft soil of the capital city was a prodigious record of the sophisticated Aztec culture written in the blood-soaked stones.

This curriculum unit endeavors to offer a supplement to the present high school textbooks and lesson plans on the Aztec Civilization on the eve of the Spanish conquest. This information is appropriate for World Cultures, Latin America Cultures and Spanish Language courses. The material presented here is adapted from a few of the surviving Aztec books, primarily the Codices Aubin, Borturini, Mendoza, Borbonicus, Borgia, Colombino, Cospi, Dresden, Ixtlixochitl, Laud, Nuttall, Telleriano, Vaticano. Vindobonensis, Fejervary-Mayer, Remensis, Magliabecchiano and Xolotl, as published in facsimile editions or as they appear as illustrations in many scholarly works on the Aztec culture. Although the Aztec culture had been in existence only a few hundred years prior to the conquest, during this short span the Aztecs manage to develop a culture and an art that is one of the most spectacular in world history. This short history of the Aztecs explores many legends and a very complex mythology in an attempt to make the lessons attractive to the teacher and informative and interesting to high school students.

This curriculum unit may be used in conjunction with Christine Elmore's unit entitled *The Indians' Discovery of Columbus*, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Volume II, August 1992. Elmore's work was the offspring of the Seminar entitled *Writings and Re-writings of the Discovery and Conquest of America*. It picks up where this unit leaves off and presents the conquest of Mexico and the subsequent downfall from the perspective of the Aztecs themselves, in the fashion of León-Portilla's *The Broken Spears*.

History

The Beginning

The Aztecs started as a group of American Indians speaking Nahuatl (Nah-wah-tl), a language of the Siouan (See-oh-ooahn) family. They were descendants of the Asian people who arrived on the North American continent after crossing the Bering Strait during Earth's last Ice Age and migrating south, following the mammoth herds. They came originally from the Northwest, from the arid cactus lands, but may have been in Mexico for several centuries before they became a powerful tribe. A similar language, Nahua, was also spoken by the Toltecs (Tohl-teks), who controlled most of Mexico between 750 AD and 1000 AD.

The Aztecs never called themselves Aztecs, but rather Mexica (Meh-shee-kah) the folk of Mexi, a priest-chief from ancient, legendary times. Legends tell that the Mexica came from Chicomoztoc (Tchi-koh-moss-tock), the Seven Caves, from the northern lands called Aztlan (Ahst-lahn), the Place of Whiteness. It is from the name of Aztlan that the word Aztec is derived. The Mexica tribe, after a long migration from Chicomoztoc, arrived at the valley of Anahuac in 1168. After moving around that area for over 150 years, they finally founded their city of Tenochtitlan (Teh-nosh-tit-lahn), Cactus Rock, on a place signaled by an eagle atop a cactus, and depicted so dramatically on a 15-foot-long strip of fig-bark paper called the Codex Boturini. (Figures 1-5) So, from here on, Mexica will refer to the ruling tribe in Tenochtitlan, and Aztec will be the generic term used for the period and population under their rule.

The Forefathers

The Aztec custom of cremating rather than burying their dead has left archeologists with few of the items of clothing, furniture, and personal goods that usually accompanied individuals of other cultures to the life beyond the grave. Yet, scholars have been able to piece together a detailed account of life in the Valley of Mexico many centuries ago. Long before the Aztecs built their great city-state, Central Mexico had been a civilized region. As early as 900 BC there had been a civilization of importance, the Olmec, along the Gulf of Mexico, a development which appeared quite suddenly among tribes of primitive farmers whose villages depended on maize cultivation. When this early Olmec civilization declined, it was succeeded in southwestern Mexico by a culture developed by the Zapotecs, who continued from 500 BC until 1480 AD, when they were absorbed into the Aztec Empire.

A new civilization arose around the city of Teotihuacan (Tee-oh-tee-wáh-kahn), the Place where the Gods were Made, on the highland plateau of Central Mexico. Here great pyramid temples were built for the Sun and Moon, and the city became home to a quarter of a million people. The paintings and sculpture from Teotihuacan show that much of later Aztec religion was already in existence by the first century AD. Teotihuacan had a great many contacts with surrounding Mexican tribes, and its art style is found throughout the whole area of the later Aztec Empire.

The Toltecs

After the fall of Teotihuacan in the 7th century AD, there was a period of confusion, which ended with the development of a mercantile empire based at Tula (Tooh-lah), the Place of Reeds, 20 miles north of what is now Mexico City. The Toltecs (Tohl-teks), who ruled from Tula, gradually controlled all civilized parts of Mexico. A civil war broke out soon after 970 AD. The fighting was excessively fierce and a terrible pestilence hit the population, so by the end of the war, the Toltec Empire was finished. Legend says that a number of Toltecs

escaped to Yucatan, far to the south, and legend says that only 20 noble Toltec families survived on the Mexican plateau.

According to the legend, these Toltecs were important because they were descended from the god Quetzalcoatl (Keht-tsal-koh-ahtl), the Precious Twin, who was the planet Venus as Morning Star. But the name can also be read as Feathered Serpent, which refers to Quetzalcoatl as the wind god whose breath rippled the leaves and grasses as if they were the green plumes of the earth serpent. Quetzalcoatl was blessed by the Creator, and his descendant alone among the Mexican nobility had the right to rule the country.

The Eagle and the Serpent

After 1000 AD the Mexican city-states were constantly at war with one another. Some reached a high level of sophistication but others were poverty-stricken and their people still wore skins and hunted with bows and arrows. Among the latter were the ancestors of the Aztecs. It was in 1168 that the leaders of this small city-state came to a ruined temple where they heard a message from a their patron god Huitzilopochtli (Weet-zeel-oh-póhsh-tlee), Blue Humming Bird of the South, as the bright sun god was at the zenith of his path in the sky. Huitzilopochtli was the god of war, force, power, action, accomplishment and nobility.

Their god sent the Aztecs on a pilgrimage which lasted nearly a century. They were promised by Huitzilopochtli that one day they would find an island in a lake with a rock on which there would be a cactus. On the cactus they would see their god in the form of a shining golden eagle holding a serpent in his talons (Figure 5). This would be the place where they were to settle and build a city from which they would rule all Mexico. Thus they created a myth that glorified their years of wandering in the desert.

After many tribulations, the Mexica were defeated and ensnared by the king of Colhuacan (Kohl-wah-kahn). The tough Aztec tribesmen were soon sent to help in a war against the surrounding tribes. They killed all the enemies they saw because they would not bring back prisoners to be sacrificed to the gods of their oppressive ruler in Colhuacan. Instead they cut off one ear from each victim, and put them in packs on their backs. When the king upbraided them as cowards who could not capture any prisoners for his gods, they silently poured a torrent of human ears over his feet.

The king was shocked and afraid. He dismissed the Aztecs and told them they could settle freely on an islet in the Lake of Mexico. So they went to the rocky islet among the swamps where their leader found a stream beside a rock, and on the rock was the cactus and the shining eagle of Huitzilopochtli. Their long pilgrimage was over. The year was 1325. There, the Aztecs founded the city of Tenochtitlan, the heart of the Aztec empire.

Tenochtitlan, the Cactus Rock

It was not until 1375 that an Aztec war chief assumed the title of Tlatoani (Tlah-toh-ah-ni), the Speaker, and so asserted his independence as the interpreter of the will of the Aztec people. In 1440 the fifth chief of the Aztecs came to rule Tenochtitlan. The Mexica now dominated the whole of the Valley of Mexico, and had allied themselves with the neighboring cities of Texcoco (Tesh-koh-koh) and Tlacopan (Tlah-koh-pahn). Their chiefs had sought out princesses of pure Toltec descent as their brides, so that they could inherit the divine right to rule, which belonged to the descendants of Quetzalcoatl. The new ruler of the Aztecs was given the title of Huetlatoani (Ooeh-tlah-toh-ah-ni) or Great Speaker for the several tribes over whom he had dominion. His name was Moctecuzoma Ilhuicamina (Mock-teh-Koo-zoh-mah Eel-weeh-kah-mee-nah) , Noble Strong Arm, He Who Aims at the Sky. During his reign the Aztec armies continued their conquests and were the first to reach

the shores of the Mexican Gulf.

In 1484 the Great Speaker Tizoc (Tee-zohk), He who offers his own Blood to the Gods, laid the foundations for the rebuilding of the ancient temple to Huitzilopochtli. He took prisoners and sacrificed some to the god. The annals say that this was the first sacrifice of human captives on a large scale. In fact it had long been felt to be necessary to kill a few captives, rarely more than 20 at even the greatest ceremonies. Tizoc died before the temple was completed. When the great building was completed, it was to be dedicated by his successor, the Great Speaker Ahuitzotl (Ah-weet-zoh-tl), Water Opossum, a magical creature believed to be the cause of death by drowning. Ahuitzotl was a patron of the arts, and a great lover of music. He had more wives than any other Mexican ruler, and rejoiced in flowers, beautiful birds and animals. Yet his name became a synonym of horror and cruelty. When the great temple was dedicated, he took 20,000 captives and had them all sacrificed in four days by eight teams of priests. The year was 1487, only five years before Columbus sailed into the West Indies. Ahuitzotl died in 1502 when the Spanish had just settled in Cuba. His successor was Moctecuzoma Xocoyotzin (Mock-the-koo-zoh-ma Shoh-koh-yoh-tzin), Prince Strong Arm, the Noble Lord.

By this time almost all of civilized Mexico was under Aztec domination. Toltec traders went far afield, bringing turquoise from New Mexico, gold from Panama and precious feathers from Guatemala. Even the independent priest-kings of the Zapotecs had surrendered. But when Moctecuzoma (Montezuma) died in 1519, his city was occupied by the Spanish troops of Hernando Cortes. The god had fulfilled his promise of glory and had now deserted the Aztecs; and it was left only for the brave young Cuauhtemoc (Kwow-teh-mok), Prince Falling Eagle, to lead a hopeless resistance against the white men.

Aztec Religion

The Aztecs had been an enlightened people during their years of expansion. They not only married Toltec nobility but also sought out knowledge of past arts and crafts. They hired teachers from the Mixtecs, who knew a great deal about Toltec customs and included many fine artisans among the tribe. The work of Aztec artists was almost entirely concerned with religion. It is possible to understand the inner meaning of many of their best works because captive Aztec nobles gave much information to Spanish missionaries after the Conquest.

When the Aztecs first settled on Cactus Rock, the religion which they described was already an ancient one, an expression of the inner spirit of Mexico. It was the result of generations of philosophical thought by American Indians who had built up a new kind of life from the discovery of agriculture right up to the evolution of great cities. Basically they believed that beyond the world and the gods of nature there must be a Supreme Creator, whom they named Ometecuhtli (Omeh-teh-koo-tli), Two Lords. As the Supreme Creator he was thought to be two persons in one, for no creation could take place without the cooperation of male and female. Ometecuhtli is shown as a pair of very old people or as a single being dressed half as a woman and half as a man.

It seems that Ometecuhtli was the product of thought by learned philosophers. Most Mexicans looked to the central fireplace in their homes as the shrine of the oldest of the gods. They called him Huehuetotl (Old Old God) and saw in him a symbol of the continuous creation of fire (equivalent to life) and the destruction of used-up things. He was a fountain of change at the heart of everything. His place in the heavens was the Pole Star, the pivot of the universe. The oldest image of this god, shown as an aged man seated with a fire-bowl

balanced on his head, comes from the ruined pyramid of Cuicuilco, near Mexico City. It dates from more than 2000 years before the Spanish conquest of Mexico.

The Mexicans believed that 13 domed heavens circulated around the pivot of the universe. There was one for each of the visible planets, the sun, the moon, the clouds, the lightning, the heat, and the rain; all contained within the dome of the fixed stars. Under the flat surface of the earth there were thought to be nine underworlds, the lowest of which were the lands of the dead.

As the central hearth-fire in the house was the pivot of earthly life, so the souls of the dead who eventually entered the fire in the lowest region of the universe ascended to a point where the Creator might send them back to earth. This was a philosophic idea of reincarnation. Most people appear to have expected a long stay in the underworld, which was after all a very happy place where people in the form of skeletons enjoyed a normal social life, presided over by the Lord and Lady of the Dead.

Mother Earth Legends

The Aztec legends describe Mother Earth as a strange monstrous being with the shape of a gigantic alligator. Long ago, the earth was drawn up from the great waters of creation by the black god Tezcatlipoca (Tess-kah-tli-poh-ka), Smoking Mirror, so named for his symbol, a black obsidian mirror which has a cloudy appearance and was used by the soothsayer to descry the future. As Tezcatlipoca put his foot into the waters, the monstrous alligator snapped at it, but the foot was not torn off until the terrible god of magic and youthful energy had drawn the earth monster from the waters and forced her back into the dry land. Since then the god has had but a single foot and his lonely footprint in the heavens is the constellation of the great Bear. According to another story, his foot was cut off when the doors of the underworld closed on his leg.

Tezcatlipoca was lord of the four directions on earth, East, West, South and North. He was also lord of the Nature gods, when these other gods were developed. A legend told of a cave in the universe where the Mother of the Gods gave birth to starry offspring. They were the 400 Northerners, the 400 Southerners, and the planets. Then she became pregnant again. The children were upset and planned to destroy the new child. Only the golden moon girl wanted to protect her mother.

When the new child was born, it proved to be the monstrous Tezcatlipoca armed as a warrior. He destroyed all the stars, and seeing his sister among the slain, he realized that her head might yet live, so he cut it off and cast her into the sky, where the head with golden bells on her cheeks can still be seen as the Moon. Each day when the sun emerges in our real world, we see that the stars of night are slain, but they are reborn as the moon comes among them, grows pregnant and then meets her ever-recurring end.

The Fifth Sun

Once the earth was established, the gods created men. Four times the human race became too self-opinionated and had to be destroyed, at about 2000-year intervals. They were destroyed by the ferocious beasts, fire, the waters, the winds. Now the present human race, who were made by the gods from the beloved maize plant which is still the sustenance of mankind, are being tested.

So the Aztecs believed that the end of this universe would come from a terrible earthquake. Whether after this fourth sun the earth would be re-populated by a better human race remains to be experienced in the future, but on each re-creation a new sun was made by the gods.

At the beginning of the present creation the Aztecs constructed a great offering place at Teotihuacan. There

they met for four days, waiting for one of them to cast himself into the fire. Finally, from a distance there came a miserably ill and poverty-stricken god. He had no reason to continue as he was, so he voluntarily cast himself into the fire. Blazing, and blue with magic power, he flew into the heavens as Tonatiuh (Toh-nah-ti-you) the Lord of Fate, the sun. The sun appeared every day, and each day had its separate fate for people, so the count of time which the fortune tellers used was based simply on the sun.

The sun was very brave, the source of all brightness and glory. He had his special heaven for brave warriors who had been sacrificed and for women who had died in childbirth. These warriors, dressed as eagles, lifted the sun to the top of the sky every morning; the women lowered him down each evening into the underworld.

Sacrifices to the Sun God

All the time the sun was thirsting from the great internal heat. So he had to be nourished and cooled by offerings of the red cactus-fruit (which meant human hearts and blood). Only a very few had to be sacrificed to keep the sun moving in the sky, but the sacrifice must never be neglected or the human race would die from the fire caused by a motionless sun.

Of all deaths the most glorious was to be sacrificed to the sun. The sun himself sacrificed his victims in the sky as he rose and the stars died. On earth the stars were represented by the spotted quails, which were killed every morning at sunrise. Sometimes people saw, at this lucky time, the little brother of the sun, Piltzintecuhtli (Peel-sin-the-kooh-tli), the Divine Princeling, the planet Mercury. Sometimes the Great Star was visible in the form of the morning star lifting up the sun. This was a symbol of Quetzalcoatl, the god of the air and of human civilization. Sometimes in the evening they saw the Great Star as the evening star, pushing the sun down into the red sunset. This was the symbol of the evil twin, Xolotl, who was an animal creature, sometimes a dog, leading people into sin and working black witchcraft against humanity and against the other gods.

The other planets were also gods; and so were the major stars. The groups of stars through which the sun passed were the houses of 13 gods. These were very like our 12 signs of the zodiac, though the Mexicans knew that there were 13 moons in any one year, but that one of them was always incomplete. Thus there was always a relationship between earthly events and the shapes in the sky where the gods had their palaces.

Earth was the domain of the powerful and capricious Tezcatlipoca, who had four forms. He was the yellow Tezcatlipoca, as god of the sunrise in the East, of bravery and growing crops. The blue Tezcatlipoca was the fertility spirit and the patron spirit of the Aztec nation. In the West he became the red Tezcatlipoca, who died by being skinned alive so that maize could be given to mankind. In this form he was Xipe Totec, Our Lord the Flayed One. In the North he was, the black Tezcatlipoca, in the land where the sun never shone, where he became the ruler of all forms of black magic and devilry.

Sacrifices to the Maize God

This religion suited warriors and the astronomer-priests, but it had less meaning for the farmers who produced the food on which the people lived. Most Mexicans were small farmers, feeding their own families and growing cotton for their own clothing. They needed to propitiate the rain and wind, the spirits of vegetation and the Earth Mother. Probably their religion was more ancient than that of the warriors to which it became wedded in the complex Aztec theological system.

Their traditions were continuous from deep antiquity and by Aztec times the whole complex of beliefs presented a kind of unity. It was no more logical than an exciting dream; and that may well be because the gods of Mexico were really those factors within the depths of the human personality from which our dreams

normally spring. Always, without any very conscious thinking about it, the Aztecs linked the world of nature with the sequence of human life, and projected their thoughts onto a very human pantheon of deities, regarded with all the affection and fear with which humans regard their neighbors, particularly of the non-human kind.

The almost passive center of the farmers' religion was the maize plant. It had many spirits, but was basically the maize god Cinteotl (Sin-teh-ohtl). This divine power within the basic foodstuff of ancient America was nurtured by Mother Earth. He loved pretty Chalchihuitlicue (Shal-shee-wee-tli-kwu), the flirtatious mistress of the rain god Tlaloc, and was cleansed by the winds sent by Quetzalcoatl.

As soon as the first green ears appeared on the maize, young girls went to the fields dancing with their hair thrown loose, looking for a shoot which was now the pretty young goddess Xilonen. In the evening, it was brought back to the temple of Chicomecoatl, goddess of sustenance, where a girl, representing the goddess of the new maize, Xilonen, was beheaded.

This sacrifice opened the door to using the new maize profanely, for food. Later, when the maize was to be harvested, bundles of ears were made up to represent the maize spirit, and were carried ceremonially to be enshrined in the granaries for next year's sowing. Then some of the grain was chewed by the girls so that it would ferment in water and so become a delightful kind of light brew.

Great magic was worked by the priests at the conclusion of the harvest so that each year the maize could be protected from its natural foes. There was another sacrifice, where a woman, representing the goddess Toci (Toh-see), Our Mother, was beheaded and immediately afterwards skinned. One priest arrayed himself in the skin, while a piece taken from the thigh was carried to the Temple of Cinteotl, god of the maize, where another participant made a mask out of it. This rite probably meant that Toci, once dead, was reborn in her son, the dried maize, the grain that would provide the winter's food. Maize was life, and the rhythm of planting and reaping conditioned the whole concept of the meaning of the passage of time in Mexico.

The Tempting of Quetzalcoatl

But what would the rain do without the winds? The Aztecs said of Quetzalcoatl that as god of the wind he came to sweep the way for the rains and in this form he was a breath of life, which made the vegetation of the earth sway like a serpent covered with green feathers. But Quetzalcoatl was also the morning star and his path, first rising in the heavens and then sinking, was also linked with the fertility myth.

The divine king brought blessings to the earth, improved agriculture, made the arts flourish and covered palaces with jewels and precious feather decorations. He taught a philosophy of gentleness and austere asceticism, offering blood from his ears and limbs daily to the gods in the outer heaven. But when the revolutions of time brought the stars into a pattern which meant that his planet was setting, he was tempted.

The goddess approached him and visited his court, bringing with her many magicians and enchanters, among whom was the black Tezcatlipoca. At a festival she offered the god-king a bowl of alcoholic pulque prepared from the agave heart. Then as he became intoxicated, she offered him hallucinogenic mushrooms and induced a trance-like ecstasy in which he abandoned his austerity and raped her.

On awakening, appalled at his break with the ascetic code of priestly behavior, Quetzalcoatl left Mexico. He gave over his power to Tezcatlipoca and sailed into the sun, where his heart burnt up and ascended again as the morning star. Already there was a confusion between the god and the first king of the Toltecs. The truth is

that the concept of the god Quetzalcoatl was very ancient indeed, but because it concerned an earthly king, it was a myth which could be applied to any period in the past.

In the Quetzalcoatl myth, an account of wind and rain and the passing seasons, which promoted fertility and then passed on, had expanded into a universal parable of the human condition. We all follow this path of development, which ends in loss of energy and eventual death. We also share something of all primitive religion within our own personalities, for the gods of old Mexico, and of many other places, are expressions of images which lie deep in the structure of the human personality.

These natural gods, in spite of their raw and often horrific appearance in Mexican art, inspired great devotion and trust in the populace. The religion was not just a formality but a reality which people lived. It was a representation of the natural universe of which they were part. The sense that mankind was an active part of the life of the whole universe was the driving force behind their artistic output. Whether it was a great image for a temple, or a little pot for use in the home, the work was an expression of the link between the universe and the ordinary human being.

The Aztec Religious Society

The Male Role in the Religious Society

The priests in Aztec Mexico were the most important example of social mobility. Warriors sometimes, by feats of great bravery, might move across barriers and become members of the tribal nobility; but priests might come from any social class. Young candidates were sent by their parents to a training school. They were questioned very carefully by the priests, because such a life meant much hardship, and demanded a great love of learning. The tests were the same for children of the poorest serf and for those of the greatest noble.

Once boys entered the temple service they went through much hardship, sleeping on the ground and being woken up for night ceremonies. They became inured to spending long hours in chanting poetic history and theology, and learning the knowledge of the stars and of medicine. They were made to perform acts of personal offering by cutting their ears and tongues to give blood to the gods.

The black-painted junior priest ate very little and never cut or cleaned his hair or nails, but acquired knowledge and wisdom as he progressed. He might become an interpreter of magical symbols or an artist or, if he were good enough, he might become a sacrificing priest who graduated from taking out the hearts of quails to performing a similar operation on living men.

The priestly way was a strangely savage life of deep learning and meditation and personal sacrifice. At the head of the priestly organization were the High Priest of the Rains and the High Priest of the Winds. Their titles show that whatever deities they were actually serving, their office was to preserve the life and fertility of the land.

The Female Role in the Religious Society

There were also religious women, who were usually employed in making vestments of beautiful weaving and feather work for the servants of the gods. They were expected to carry out the cleaning of the temples and also to cleanse humans from disease, just as the goddess Tlazolteotl could do with her powers. They had a

considerable knowledge of herbal medicine, which was aided by the national passion for taking a steam bath as a form of spiritual purification. It is clear from the painted books that some of the priestesses were elevated to the rank of Sacrificers, who took human hearts for the gods.

@2H(after1H):The Inspired Prophets Another group of religious servants were those whom the gods seized upon and caused to utter prophecy. These were people who saw visions, or heard the voices of the spirits of the dead or the voices of the gods. Many of them would have been trance mediums of great power in our day. But any person who showed an abnormal mental condition was thought to have received a divine inspiration. A passage in a manuscript called the Codex Laud, at Oxford University, England, compares the highly trained astronomer-priest to the inspired prophet. One has command of the moving stars but the other has command of the breath of life.

End of the Aztec World

In the Aztec version of the final collapse of Mexico we find that not all the population fought the Spaniards. They moved only when led by the great nobles to whom they owed allegiance. Mostly they suffered passively, and acted bravely when called upon by the brilliantly feathered war leaders. Though decimated by the smallpox, the Aztecs continued to give battle with their Stone Age weapons against Spaniards clad in steel and armed with cannon. The young Cuauhtemoc was their last elected war leader. But finally he surrendered as the last buildings in the city of Cactus Rock were torn down. Later, when he made a brave effort to achieve freedom he was captured and strangled. But Cuauhtemoc became the national hero of modern Mexico; and his mother tongue, the ancient Nahuatl language, has become a language of poetry in Mexico.

The Aztec Calendar: The Civil Year and The Magical Year

The Aztec civil year was not divided into weeks and months like those of today, but into periods of 20 days each. Eighteen of these periods made up the calendar year, which included five 'nothing' days to bring the count correctly up to 365 days. There was an extraordinary system of working out a divinatory year, which consisted of periods of 260 (20 x 13) days, within which all the normal variations of fate took place. When the magical and civil calendars came into line, which occurred every 52 years, when the star group Pleiades ((The Seven Sisters) reached the center of the sky, there was a great festival at which new fire was ceremonially made and distributed, and every temple was renovated as if creation had begun again.

The Aztec day began at sunset. There was no calculation of hours, because in all normal life it was quite sufficient to observe sunset and sunrise. There was a period when the sun was at its highest point in the day, at noon, and at night there was midnight. This was probably determined by noting the stars which appeared in the zenith when the sun set, and waiting till they were setting on the western horizon. This procedure would be sufficiently accurate for the Tlatoani, the Speaker, and the priests to make the midnight observation of the starry sky.

There were nine gods who were known as the Lords of the Night. Each in turn held sway over the hours of darkness for a night. There were 13 Lords of the Day, and each of them held sway in turn over a day. Thus, in the religious calendar of 260 days, which consisted of the combinations of 13 numerals with the 20 days of

each period, there was this other rhythm of ruling deities of each period. Each 13 -day period had a protecting pair of deities, and similarly the 20-day periods had each a guardian spirit. Within this fantastic almanac there were also 13 magical birds flying with their individual influences on fate.

The Calendar Stone or Piedra del Sol

On December 17, 1790, workers excavating a street in downtown Mexico City uncovered an enormous monolith buried face down near what was once a corner of the ceremonial center of Tenotchtitlan. It is commonly known as the Aztec Calendar or as the Piedra del Sol (Sun Stone) and it depicts the mechanism of the universe and of Aztec concepts of their place in the cosmic scheme. This monumental work of art measures 12 feet across and weighs 24 tons. There is a strong possibility that the Piedra del Sol served as an altar for human sacrifice, a good reason for the second archbishop of Mexico to have ordered the stone buried 231 years before in December of 1559.

The Calendar Stone is composed of several concentric rings:

The innermost ring contains the face of either the Sun God Tonatiuh or, more likely, the Earth's face.

The second circle from the center depicts the four epochs, called "Suns," survived by Mother Earth. The First Sun is called Nahui Ocelotl (Nah-wee Oh-se-lotl), Four Ocelot (Jaguar) and represents an age where the Earth was inhabited by giants who eventually were devoured by the beasts. The Second Sun is called Nahui Ehecatl (Nah-wee Aye-ekah-tl), Four Wind and represents an age of agriculture that ended when hurricanes and strong winds swept everything away. The Third Sun is called Nahui Quiauhuitl (Nah-wee Kwee-ah-wee-tl), Four Fire Rain and represents an age when cities, temples and pyramids were built only to be destroyed by fire from the interior of the Earth. The Fourth Sun is called Nahui Atl (Nah-woeee Ah-tl), Four Water and represents an era when oceans were being navigated by ships and sailors who perished when the great flood covered the whole Earth. The pattern suggests that the Fifth Sun was destined to be destroyed by earthquake.

The third circle from the center depicts the twenty day signs of the sacred calendar. It starts with (1) Cipactli (See-pahk-tee), Earth Monster, top left as the first day and proceeds counterclockwise with (2) Ehecatl , Wind, (3) Calli (Kah-lee), House, (4) Cuetzpallin (Kwetz-pah-lin), Lizard, (5) Cōatl (Koh-ah-tl), Serpent, (6) Miquiztli (Mee-kweez-tee), Death, (7) Mazatl (Mah-zah-tl), Deer, (8) Tochtli (Tosh-tee), Rabbit, (9) Atl (Ah-tl), Water, (10) Itzcuintli (Eetz-kween-tee), Dog, (11) Ozomatli (Oh-zoh-mah-tee), Monkey, (12) Malinalli (Mah-lee-nah-lee), Dry Grass, (13) Acatl (Ah-kah-tl), Reed, (14) Ocelotl (Oh-seh-loh-tl), Ocelot, (15) Cuauhtli (Kwah-ooht-tee), Eagle, (16) Cozcacuauhtli (Kohz-kah-kwah-oo-tee), Turkey, (17) Ollin (Ohl-leen), Movement, (18) Tecpatl (Tess-pah-tl), Flint, (19) Quiauhuitl (Kwee-ah-wee-tl), Fire Rain, and ends with (20) Xochitl (Shoh-shee-tl), Flower.

The fourth circle from the center, shaped like a compass rose, depicts the present Sun or age, the Fifth Sun. Inside this circle is contained the calendar itself, the symbols for the four past Suns, and the identity of the central face.

The outer circle, fifth from the center, depicts two Fire Serpents Xiuhcōatl (Shee-ooht-kwa-tl) which represent the universe that surrounds the Earth. The Xiuhcōatl was believed to carry the sun across the sky from sunrise to sunset, and at night one would find it hiding in the Milky Way, indicated by the star glyphs on its upturned

snout. The two groups of stars may represent the Big Dipper (Ursa Major) and the seven sisters of Pleiades, which was the most important star group for Mesoamerican cultures. When the seven sisters reached the center of the sky, the Aztecs would be assured that their world would go on for another fifty-two years.

Illustrations

The line drawings appearing in this curriculum unit are the work of Noemia R. Barroqueiro and are in the public domain. They may be copied and used freely in and outside the classroom. Figure One through Figure Four: The journey to the Promised Land, the chronicle of the Aztec travels from their island in Aztlan, the traditional Aztec tribal homeland, to the shores of Lake Tetzoco as it is recorded on a 15-foot-long strip of fig-bark paper called the Codex Boturini. Figure One shows a temple pyramid surrounded by six dwellings where two founding members occupy the temple courtyard: a man with his mantle drawn about him and a priestess named Chimalma (Shee-mahl-mah), Reposing Shield, kneeling behind him. The journey to the Promised Land starts with a paddle across the lake in year 1 Flint or 1116 AD, as depicted by the square-framed glyph above the footprints which track the migration to Chapultepec. First stop is a visit to the god Huitzilopochtli, Hummingbird Left, who lives inside Colhuacan (Kol-wah-kahn), Curved Mountain. Huitzilopochtli, with his head peering out of a hummingbird's beak, urges them to move on, as indicated by the squiggles above his head. Figure Two shows the full migration to Chapultepec by eight tribes, each tribe identified by a male figure with a tribal glyph leaving a house. The first tribe on top of the picture was known as the Matlatzinca (Mah-tlaht-zeen-ka), People of the Net. Leading the trek are four Teomama (Teh-oh-mah-mah), god bearers, carrying the deities on their backs. Tezacoatl (Tehz-kah-koh-ah-tl), Mirror Snake, leads the procession by carrying the effigy of Huitzilopochtli, and Chimalma brings up the rear. Figure Three shows that in their travels the migrants came upon a land of great beauty and fruitfulness highlighted by the anthropomorphized tree. There they built an altar to Huitzilopochtli and celebrated with a feast. As they were eating, misfortune strikes and the tree splits in half, a bad omen representing the legendary loss of paradise. Huitzilopochtli urges the tearful Aztecs to continue their journey leaving the other tribes behind.

Figure Four shows that the Aztecs followed Huitzilopochtli's advice. They continued their journey led by the Teomama, pausing time to time along their way to hunt, rest, sacrifice victims captured in skirmishes. The complete Boturini codex shows twenty-two successive stopovers along the way to the shores of Lake Tezcoco and final settlement at Chapultepec, the grasshopper hill.

Figure Five adorns the frontispiece of the Codex Mendoza. It depicts the rise of Tenochtitlan, with the founding fathers paying homage to the city's eagle-crowned emblem above the Aztec heraldic shield. The blue diagonal bands represent the canals that divided the city into quadrants. The bottom panel celebrates the Aztec victories over rival city-states, Colhuacan and Tenayuca.

Figure Six is a line drawing of the Piedra del Sol or the Sun Stone, also known as the Aztec Calendar. It is an intricately carved circular stone 4-feet thick, measuring 12 feet in diameter, and weighing more than 24 tons. It represents the cosmic universe of the Aztecs, a road map to their destiny. At the time of the Spanish conquest, the Aztecs believed they were living in the fifth and final era, which the gods had created in 986 AD and would end by earthquake on the ritual date "4-movement". Thanks to Cortés, the end of their world came much sooner, in 1591.

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Lesson Plans (Day One & Day Two) Spanish Levels I-IV, World Cultures I

Objectives and Strategies

Objective 1: To learn the origins of the Mesoamerican population.

Objective 2: To draw a map of the Mesoamerican region and be able to trace the immigration route, locate and plot the more famous city-states.

Objective 3: To be able to identify and plot the location of the early civilizations of Mesoamerica, from the Olmecs to the Aztecs.

Strategies: Students could be shown a World Map with or without the depiction of the major population movements. Indicate how the land masses of the present world were once one huge block of land named Pangaea (pan jí' uh). To support this idea, point out that, among other things, the western coast of Africa and the eastern coast of South America fit together like the pieces of a giant puzzle. Provide the students with, or have them draw, a map of Mesoamerica to plot the approximate locations of the earlier civilizations -the Olmecs, Teltocs, Zapotecs, Mexica, etc. They were the descendants of the first Asian people to arrive on the North American continent after crossing the Bering Strait and migrating south, following the mammoth herds.

Classroom materials: World Map showing Tectonic Plates and Population Movements. Supplies to complete a drawing of a map of Mesoamerica. Excerpts from Narrative in the Curriculum Unit or from books in the Teachers Bibliography.

Lesson Plans (Day Three & Day Four) Spanish Levels I-IV, World Cultures I

Objectives and Strategies

Objective 4: To learn the roots of the Aztecs, as one of the original Mexica tribes from Aztlan, the Place of Whiteness.

Objective 5: To be familiar with the history of the Aztecs, from their long migration from Chicomoztoc to their arrival at the valley of Anahuac in 1168, and final settlement 150 years later in their city of Tenochtitlan (Tee-noh-shtit-lahn).

Objective 6: To learn about the art, writings, religious customs, legends, mythology of the Aztecs. Understand what was the daily life of the Aztec on the eve of the Spanish conquest.

Objective 7: To understand the different roles males and females played in Aztec religious society. To compare with present day situation in Western Europe and Latin America.

Strategies: The lecture on the history of the Aztec and the lengthy pilgrimage through the desert in search of a spot of land with a cactus rock on which to build Tenochtitlan should be presented to the students via the codices, e.g., the Boturini Codex (Figures 1-4) and the Mendoza Codex (Figure 5). As a class project, students should be required to complete a codex of their own depicting the sequence of historical, religious,

mythological scenes found in the curriculum unit such as the Pilgrimage to Tenochtitlan, the Mother Earth legends, the human sacrifices to the Sun and Maize gods, the Tempting of Quetzalcoatl and the Spanish conquest.

Classroom materials: Drawing paper and utensils; examples of codices found in books listed in the Teachers Bibliography in the curriculum unit.

Lesson Plan (Day Five) Spanish Levels I-IV, World Cultures I

Objectives and Strategies

Objective 8: To become familiar with the story of the Aztec Calendar, both the Civil Year and the Ritual Year.

Objective 9: To understand the significance of the Piedra del Sol or Sun Stone. Be able to identify the glyphs and their significance in the five rings that make up this magnificent piece of art.

Objective 10: To construct a Piedra del Sol, as a class project (Figure 6).

Strategies: This section of the curriculum unit may be easily handled through a class project designed to construct a large cardboard Calendar Stone Puzzle suitable for hanging as a permanent display at the School. Each class may be divided into groups of three or four students to handle different sections of the Calendar Stone. Each group would then be responsible to make a presentation to the rest of the class on what they have learned through research about their assigned section and to produce its assigned Calendar Stone Puzzle piece, appropriately colored and to the scale which was predetermined by the Teacher. When assembled, the Calendar Stone should be mounted and secured to the classroom wall or other authorized location.

Final Unit Evaluation: A multiple choice test is recommended.

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