

AZTEC CULTURE

LOCATION

The Aztec culture existed on the plains of Mexico from the 11th century until the beginning of the 16th century. The Aztec language, called Nahuatl, is still spoken by more than 1 million Mexicans today.

HISTORY

It is thought that the ancestors of the Aztecs came to North America via the Bering Strait during the last ice age. After living in the southwest of what is now the United States, they started migrating further south, towards Mexico, around 1168. The first Aztec settlement was created in South Central Mexico on an island in a lake (Lake Chapultepec) around 1248. They lived here fairly peacefully for about a century, but then wars broke out with their neighbors. Many Aztecs became slaves and those that escaped were forced to move on. They resettled near Lake Texcoco around 1325.

Aztec fortunes changed quickly after this. They drained the water of the lake and built artificial islands with lush gardens. They also started to build their capital city, Tenochtitlan. Gradually, the Aztecs also began to conquer the surrounding civilizations and established a powerful empire. The neighboring peoples were forced to supply the Aztecs with food, slaves, pottery, textiles and on special occasions, victims for human sacrifice.

In 1519 the Spanish explorer Hernando Cortés, looking for gold, landed in Mexico with a few hundred men and horses. At this time there were as many as 15 million people living in the Aztec empire and 300,000 in Tenochtitlan. Cortés gathered together all the conquered peoples in the empire who wanted freedom from the Aztecs and headed for Tenochtitlan. The Aztecs, especially King Montezuma, thought Cortés and his men were gods and this allowed Cortés to march into Tenochtitlan as a guest and take the Aztec King Montezuma prisoner. Two years later he defeated the Aztec armies and destroyed their capital. Half the people in the city were either killed or died of a small pox epidemic that the Europeans brought with them. Cortés burnt down many beautiful palaces and temples the Aztecs had built to honor the gods, and destroyed many of the records the Aztecs made of their society and religion.

Those who converted to Christianity were spared by the Spanish and accepted as Christians. Those who refused to convert were persecuted or killed. Many Spanish married the newly converted Aztecs and this has led to society that was very ethnically mixed. However, over time the Aztecs lost their identity and became part of the Spanish Empire. After Mexican Independence in 1821 they became Mexican. Millions of Mexicans today have both Aztec and Spanish heritage (called mestizos), but little remains of Aztec culture.

RELIGION

Aztec religion was a mixture of beliefs created from the many civilizations that the Aztecs encountered on their journey south or that they conquered while establishing their empire. They took elements from civilizations such as the Toltecs, the Zapotecs and the Mayas. The gods that were worshipped by the peoples they conquered were integrated into their own religion and became Aztec gods. In this way, the Aztecs ended up having hundreds of gods. Since it was impossible to worship all the gods, different branches of Aztec religion came into existence. Each of these branches worshipped different gods.

Human sacrifice was important in Aztec religion and was meant to please the gods. It seems that between 20,000 - 50,000 people were sacrificed every year for this purpose. The sacrifices took place on huge altars in front of large crowds. The hearts of the victims were cut from the bodies and then offered to the gods.

The Aztecs believed in a heaven called Tlalcan and a hell called Mictlan. For those who went to hell they would stay for a maximum of four years. During these four years the family of the dead person could make offerings and sacrifices to make the journey of the dead person to heaven easier. The more one suffered in life, the easier the road to heaven. Babies went to hell right away because they had not suffered yet. Humans who were sacrificed would have an easy road to heaven due to their involuntary and painful death.

Due to some common elements between the main Aztec religious beliefs and Christianity, it was not so difficult for the Spanish priests to convince most Aztecs to convert. Today most Mexicans are Catholic like the priests who converted their ancestors.

SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND POLITICS:

Aztec society was very powerful, very rich and also had a very complex and highly developed political system. The capital city of Tenochtitlan alone had thousands of nobles, priests and administrators, as well as thousands of slaves. The leaders of the Aztec society were chosen by politicians and religious dignitaries. Good leaders were those who spoke well and had been victorious in battle.

Boys and girls had very different roles in society. Boys were taught arts and crafts in school and were trained to be warriors. Girls were taught to cook, to look after the house and take care of the children. Aztec women usually married at about 16 years of age.

Aztec men used fishing, hunting, gathering and farming to feed themselves. The rivers were full of fish, shrimp and insects. Those living near the ocean ate crabs, fish, oysters and turtles. Some of the animals that were hunted were rabbits, deer, turkey, pumas and coyotes. Many women made cotton textiles in the home.

The Aztecs developed a system of growing many of the plants they first gathered, such as corn, tomatoes, cocoa, bananas, sweet potatoes, pumpkin and squash. By growing these plants it was not necessary to migrate from place to place in search of food.

After the Spanish gained control of Mexico its economy served to please the European conquerors. This has led to much poverty for the native peoples in Mexico. Today Mexico is a very dynamic society, but it remains quite poor. Especially since the worldwide oil crisis of the 1980's life has been difficult for the Mexicans. Its neighbor to North, the United States, plays a major role in its current economic situation. Due to the poverty in Mexico hundreds of thousands try to migrate to the United States each year in search of work and a better life.

