

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Archaeological studies of the Mexican plateau reveal that human beings have been living in that region since 6000 B.C. From A.D. 900 to 1200, the Toltec people dominated the northern part of Central America, and their capital city of Tula was located just north of what is now Mexico City. The Toltecs captured the Maya who lived in the Yucatan Peninsula. Like the Maya, the Toltecs possessed a rich heritage of myths and legends. Their spoken language, Nahuatl, also had a rich cultural tradition. Toltec power was destroyed from within by civil war, which left Tula in ruins in 1200 and left the area without a dominant power for more than a century.

According to Aztec tradition, the Azteca (people of Aztlan) obeyed the command of their god and left Aztlan (located far north of the Colorado River) sometime in the twelfth century. They wandered from place to place until, in 1325, they finally settled the area that has become Mexico City. The Aztecs held the Toltecs in high regard both politically and culturally. The first Aztec ruler, who came to power in 1376, claimed to be a descendant of Quetzalcoatl, the founder of the Toltec people. Thereafter, Toltec culture became an integral part of Aztec culture.

The Aztecs adopted the Toltec language and their myths and legends, blending them with their own and recording them. Under Aztec rule, architecture, the arts, and literature flourished. Their largest cities were much larger than any Spanish city of that time, and they contained elaborate palaces, temples, and waterways. The Aztecs took pride in creating works of metal and of feathers, in carving wood and huge sculptures of stone, and in forming mosaics of gems. They had a great interest in history, in the form of myths and legends, and in poetry. Today, more than a million people continue to speak Nahuatl, the Aztec language.

When the Spaniards invaded Central America and conquered the Aztecs in 1519, Hernan Cortes was helped both by neighboring peoples and by the Aztec emperor himself. The bloody practices of the Aztecs had created many enemies, who mistakenly thought the invaders would be better. The Aztec emperor welcomed Cortes because he believed that the Spaniard was Quetzalcoatl, returning as their tradition said he had promised.

The Spaniards burned most of the literature of the “pagan” peoples whom they conquered. As with the Maya, whom they conquered five years later, they burned entire libraries because they feared the pagan materials were harmful to Christians.

The Spaniards preserved certain aspects of the Aztec culture by learning the language and recording the literature in Spanish. Their point of view is clear from the nature of their accounts. They were both fascinated and repelled by the non-Christian myths and legends. We will run into this problem again and again, as we encounter outside chroniclers of indigenous traditions who are both fascinated and disgusted by the traditions they are helping to displace.

In the process of converting the more educated Aztecs to Christianity, the Spanish friars taught them to write their own language in the Roman alphabet and to record their myths and legends in this more Westernized version of the Nahuatl language. The Aztecs often blended newly acquired Christian concepts and literary style into their own, older oral tradition. These transcriptions, made by both Spaniards and Aztecs in the 1500s, reflect the Spanish influence and so are not entirely authentic.

"The Five Worlds and Their Suns" and "The Creation of Human Beings" were recorded in the sixteenth-century Nahuatl manuscript, the *Chimalpopoca Codex: Annals of Cuauhtitlan* and *Legend of the Suns*. "The Creation of the Earth" was recorded in a sixteenth-century French manuscript, *The History of Mexico*. The myths that relate how Quetzalcoatl is tricked and driven from the Toltec capital by Tezcatlipoca appear in two major, primary sources: the *Chimalpopoca Codex* and the *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, a collection of Nahuatl texts made in the sixteenth century by the Spanish priest Fray Bernardino de Sahagun.

APPEAL AND VALUE

Like the Greeks, the Irish, and certain other cultures from the Americas, the Aztecs describe the creation of a succession of worlds, with their world being the current one. Like many other cultures, the Aztecs also describe a great flood.

The Aztecs did not create their myths; instead, they adopted existing Toltec myths to conform to their own beliefs. They identified the major Toltec god, Quetzalcoatl, with Huitzilopochtli, who was the Aztec god of the sun and of war. Aztec/Toltec myths

are unusual in that both gods and human beings are required to make sacrifices in order to preserve the life of the universe and the lives of people. In "The Five Worlds and Their Suns," human beings who live in the first four worlds are unwilling to do this, so the gods punish them.

The need to sacrifice human beings to the sun was an important religious concept among the Aztecs. The Aztecs knew that the fiery rays of a motionless sun would destroy the earth, and they lived in fear that the sun would halt in the midst of its daily journey. They believed that the heart and blood, divine or human, would quench the hot sun's thirst and renew its strength so it could continue its journey. The Aztecs were known to go to war to obtain these human sacrifices, evoking hatred from neighboring cultures.

The fifth world acquires light because two gods are willing to sacrifice their lives for the sun. According to another myth, Quetzalcoatl later makes the same sacrifice that Nanautzin does in this myth.

As part of their religious tradition, each year the Aztecs chose a boy to live like a god for the coming year and then, on the anniversary of his selection, to die in order to revitalize the sun. During that year, this boy was honored as the earthly form of the god Tezcatlipoca. He was dressed in fine clothing, given eight servants to accompany him constantly, and trained in music and religious practices.

Twenty days before his day of sacrifice, the boy put on the clothes he would wear at his death and married four virgins, to whom the Aztecs gave the names of goddesses. The five days preceding his death were filled with feasting and dancing.

On the day of his sacrifice, the boy was transported in a canopy-covered canoe to the temple. As he climbed the temple steps, he played and broke a succession of flutes. When he reached the top, waiting priests bound him to an altar, cut out his heart, and offered it to the sun. Then a new boy was chosen to perform this role for the following year.

The remaining myths in the Creation Cycle explain other aspects of Aztec life. "The Creation of the Earth" explains why the earth also needs to feast upon human blood. In "The Creation of Human Beings," Quetzalcoatl injures himself to provide the blood that will bring life to a new race of people. "The Creation of Music" reveals the importance of music in the Aztec/Toltec culture. The language is unusually beautiful because the source of the myth is a poem.