

About the Aztecs: Religion

Read the text and write notes on a separate sheet of paper for the following terms:

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| 1. polytheistic | 8. Chalchiuhtlicue | 16. southern paradise |
| 2. Black Tezcatlipoca | 9. The Fifth Sun | 17. Mictlan |
| 3. Lord and Lady of Duality | 10. levels of heaven | 18. nine trials (length of time, descriptions) |
| 4. Quetzalcoatl (be thorough for this one!) | 11. levels of the underworld | 19. Mictlantecuhtli |
| 5. jaguar | 12. creator gods | 20. ceremonies |
| 6. pine nuts | 13. eastern paradise | 21. human sacrifice (purpose? rationale?) |
| 7. Tlaloc | 14. hummingbirds | |
| | 15. western paradise | |

Religion Overview

- The religion of the Aztecs is polytheistic. Some of the gods had been known in Mexico for many years; others were adopted from the religions of the people the Aztecs conquered. The Aztec religion is one in which the practitioners were constantly trying to win the favor of the gods to influence the gods to look favorably upon them (Bray 1968: 152). This was done through offerings to the gods, human and otherwise.

Religion: The Five Suns

- The Aztecs believed that it took four attempts at creating the earth and mankind before the gods finally got everything right with the fifth attempt. The first creation took place when Black Tezcatlipoca (tes kah tlee POH kah), one of the four sons of the Lord and Lady of Duality, Ometecuhtli (oh may tay COO tlee) and Omecihuatl (oh may SEE wahtl) respectively, changed himself into the sun. The earth at that time was inhabited by giants who ate acorns, berries and roots. Tezoatlipoca's rival, Quetzalcoatl (ket sahl KO ahtl), couldn't stand the fact that Tezcatlipoca was ruling the universe, so he knocked him out of the sky. In his rage at being knocked out of the sky, Tezcatlipoca turned into a jaguar and destroyed the earth.
- Attempt number two began when Quetzalcoatl took over the heavens. He created people on earth who ate pine nuts. Tezoatlipoca overthrew Quetzalcoatl and destroyed the earth with a great wind. The few people who were left on earth were changed into monkeys.
- The third creation began when Tlaloc (TLAHL lock), the god of rain, became the sun. Quetzalcoatl sent rain which flooded the earth, killing almost all mankind. Those who did survive were turned into birds.

- When Chalchiuhtlicue (chahl chee oo TLEE kway), the water goddess, took over the sun's responsibilities, the fourth creation had begun. This time, however, the earth was destroyed by flood and those men who survived became fish.
- The final creation (the fifth sun) occurred when the gods met and decided that one among them had to sacrifice himself to become the new sun. One poor, humble god did this and became the sun. However, the sun hung in the sky and didn't move. In order for the sun to move, it was necessary for all of the gods to sacrifice themselves. Once the sun was moving across the sky, it was Quetzalcoatl who took on the responsibility of creating mankind. He did this by going to the underworld to bring back to earth the bones of past generations. While fleeing the god of the underworld with his bag of bones, he slipped and fell, breaking the bones. He sprinkled the pieces of one with his blood and turned them into men. Because the pieces of bone were all different sizes, the men and women he created were all different sizes, too (Bray 1968: 154). While there are different variations of this account, in all versions, each creation brings man and food closer to the ideal of mankind (Caso 1958: 16).

Religion: Afterlife

- The Aztecs believed in a heaven and an underworld. There were thirteen levels of heaven and nine of the underworld. There were also four horizontal points which corresponded to the directions of the compass and were associated with the four creator gods. All beings were assigned to one of these four points, depending on the day one was born. The earth was believed to be a large disc surrounded by water at the point where the horizontal and vertical met. The Lord and Lady of Duality, mentioned earlier also were the rulers of this central point (Bray 1968: 155).
- The Aztecs believed that where you went after death depended upon what you did on earth and how you died. The eastern paradise, the house of the sun was the home of the souls of warrior who were killed in combat. This also included the souls of enemy warriors who had a special god of the enemy dead. Sacrificed victims went there also. It was believed that souls stayed in the eastern paradise for four years, and then they returned to earth as hummingbirds or other exotic birds.
- The western paradise, the house of corn, was believed to be for women who died in childbirth. They also returned to earth as phantoms of bad omens. The paradise of Tlaloc, the southern paradise was for people who died of lightening, leprosy or other sickness. This was a place of plentiful food.
- The paradise of the north was for the rest of the dead. It was called Mictlan (MEEK tlahn) and getting there involved going through nine trials and took four years to accomplish.
- The Aztec accounts of the trials a soul must go through to get to Mictlan are as follows:

- 1) cross a deep river(dogs were buried with their dead owners to guide them on this journey.)
 - 2) pass between two mountains which were joined together
 - 3) climb an obsidian mountain
 - 4) pass through icy wind that cut like a knife
 - 5) pass through a place where flags waved
 - 6) be pierced by arrows
 - 7) pass among wild beasts which ate human hearts
 - 8) pass over a narrow path of stone
 - 9) reach this level where the soul found rest.
- In order to make this trip, people were buried in a squatting position with items to help them on the way. These included water, the dog (tawny in color) mentioned at the first level of hell, a jade bead to act as the dead's heart at the seventh hell and other personal objects to give to Mictlantecuhtli (meek tlahn tay COO flee), god of the dead, or Mictecacihuatl (meek tay kah SEE wahtl), mistress of the underworld, when they got to the ninth region.
 - There were thirteen heavens. Ometecuhtli and Omecihuatl, the creator gods, lived in the double twelfth and thirteenth heavens. It was believed that the souls of babies went there as well as the souls of men waiting to be reincarnated upon the destruction of the human race (Caso 1958: 64).

Religion: Rituals and Ceremonies

- Agriculture was the primary focus of the Aztec religion and the forces of water and earth were directly related to agricultural fertility. The Aztecs saw human life metaphorically like maize or a flower. Man was born to die, but carried the seed of reproduction (Miller and Taube 1993: 31). Therefore, ceremonies dealt with life not afterlife to ensure health, fertility and to avoid natural disasters.
- As mentioned earlier, the Aztec religion was one of constant effort to propitiate the gods in order that they might look favorably upon mankind. The Aztecs, through their religious practices, endeavored to keep a balance in nature. One religious practice to accomplish this was human sacrifice.
- The sacrificing of humans was looked upon as a pay back to the gods (Miller and Taube 1993: 30). Just as corn might be sacrificed to Tlaloc, the rain god, in thanks for that seasons harvest and to ensure future crops, so humans would be sacrificed to the gods to ensure the continuation of the human race. Sacrifice was considered a necessity for the welfare of man. Those sacrificed were considered messengers to the gods, not victims.

