

Mexican Roots

Lesson #3: MEXICANS: OLD ROOTS, YOUNG PEOPLE

TIME

50 minutes

MATERIALS FROM TRUNK

Book - *The Lady of Guadalupe*

Object - Poster of Our Lady of Guadalupe

Graphics - #1, 2, 14

OTHER MATERIALS

World map

TEACHER PREPARATION

Read the historical background section and be prepared to discuss it with the class.

OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to:

- 1) recognize ways the Indian and Spanish cultures combined through an examination of a fictional novel and photographs
- 2) recognize similarities and differences between these two cultures

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

To understand Mexican Americans, their culture, and their beliefs it is necessary to first understand who or what "Mexican" is. The Mexican people have a complex and fascinating past that combines the history and cultures of two civilizations: the Spanish and Mesoamerican Indian. Although Mexicans have very old roots they are a young people.

Mesoamerican Indian - Everywhere in Mexico the past is preserved in great monuments of stone. Just north of Mexico City are the massive pyramids of the Sun and Moon built more than two thousand years ago without the use of the wheel or metal tools. Along the coastline of the Yucatán Peninsula, the towers and temples of ruined Mayan (MAH-yahn) cities look out over the blue-green waters of the Caribbean Sea.

The "cradles of civilization" usually are seen as those along the great river valleys of North Africa and Asia. However, two others, which many people are unfamiliar with, are those of Mesoamerica and Peru. The civilization of Mesoamerica covered part of North America and Central America. Within Mesoamerica were groups of tribes, confederations, and empires including the Olmec, Maya, Teotihuacán (tay-o-tee-wah-CAHN), Toltecs, Chichimecs (chee-chee-MAKES), and Aztecs.

Many Mesoamerica tribes had highly complex societies. The Olmecs had a genius for science, philosophy, and art. They were the first astronomers of ancient America, and they used their observations of the sun and stars to create a precise calendar. The Maya invented a system of writing using hieroglyphics, and they recorded their history in thousands of books. Their mathematical system was about one thousand years more advanced than that being used in Europe at the same time. The capital city of the Teotihuacán (tay-o-tee-wah-CAHN) had a population of 200,000 and included houses, workshops, apartment complexes, and other structures that covered more than twelve square miles. Irrigation canals and chinampas (floating gardens) helped them produce the food they needed to feed their people. Today the Indian culture and heritage of Mexico is still evident in its art, architecture, life, and dress.

The Aztecs are the group most glorified in the myths and histories of modern Mexico. A legend of the Aztecs, or Mexicas (may-SHEE-cahs), tells how they moved out of the north and into the Valley of Mexico. The god of war, Huitzilopochtli (wee-tseel-o-POACH-tee), had guided them in their journey and advised them to go to an island where they would find an eagle with a serpent in its mouth. This was the location on which they were to build their city. This is the same symbol used today on the Mexican flag. Untutored in the arts and sciences of earlier Indian civilizations, the Aztecs were warriors who gradually conquered the sedentary people in the valley.

The Aztec culture drew on other Indian cultures in the Valley of Mexico. The Aztecs became famous for their great cities and monuments, artists, craftsmen, mathematicians, and scientists. They gained power and spread their political influence by conquering many tribes of the region and extracting heavy tributes from them. In the process they made many enemies. The Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán (tay-noach-TEE-tlahn) flourished from 1325 until 1519 when the Spanish arrived.

Another Aztec legend played a fateful role in the Spanish conquest. The Aztecs were familiar with stories about Quetzalcoatl (cay-tsahl-CO-ahtl), a great ruler of the Toltec Indians, named after the god Quetzalcoatl. In this legend, the fair-skinned, bearded ruler was exiled, but he had promised to return. The year predicted for his return, 1519, was the same year that Spanish explorer Hernán Cortés arrived in Mexico. Montezuma, the Aztec leader, received word of the arrival of strangers led by a fair-skinned and bearded man, and he suspected that Quetzalcoatl had returned to claim his throne as prophesied. As Cortés moved towards Tenochtitlán the capital city, Montezuma sent gifts. Even though Montezuma commanded a large army he did not resist the small group of Spaniards because he feared their leader was Quetzalcoatl. By the time the Aztecs realized Cortés was not the returning Quetzalcoatl, but rather an ambitious man, resistance was too late.

Spanish Conquest - Spain was invaded by many peoples, who conquered it, settled it, and contributed to its customs, traditions, and institutions. The Phoenicians influenced the spread of commerce, and the Greeks the production of olives and grapes. Beginning in the third century the Romans arrived to spend the next one hundred years building cities and roads, improving mining and agriculture, and helping impose the Christian religion. The Visigoths developed a political alliance with the Catholic Church, which has played an

important role in the histories of both Spain and Mexico. The years 711 to 1492 saw a flourishing of agriculture and industry and an advancement in art, literature, and music under the influence of the Moslems. Finally in 1492 two strong monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabel, expelled the Moslems and began the unification of Spain.

In 1492 Ferdinand and Isabel commissioned Christopher Columbus to find an ocean route to the Indies. Following his arrival in the New World the Spaniards transplanted their way of life through settlements on the Caribbean Islands. By exploring the resources in the area they accumulated enough wealth to undertake future expeditions. The most successful sea explorations of Mexico and Central America were launched from Cuba by Governor Diego Valásquez.

Governor Valásquez chose Hernán Cortés to lead an expedition to the coast of Yucatán. When Valásquez changed his mind and relieved Cortés of his command, Cortés raided the supply houses and left with men, horses, cannons, guns, and ships. Cortés founded the city of Veracruz and began learning all he could about the kingdom of the Aztecs. He learned about the legend of Quetzalcoatl and of the hatred many Indian tribes had for the Aztecs. These Indians were tired of paying tributes to the Aztecs of sacrifices and taxes. Cortés saw these people as potential allies and made plans to launch an assault upon Montezuma at Tenochtitlán, the capital city. The assault upon the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán marked the beginning of the end for the Aztec empire.

Cortés advanced to the capital city and took Montezuma captive in November 1519. For the next six months Cortés ruled through Montezuma. The Aztec nobles eventually elected Montezuma's brother to replace Montezuma. Warfare erupted with the subsequent death of Montezuma. Cortés and his men retreated under the Aztec assault, but luck was with the Spanish. Their allies, the Tlaxcalans (tlash-CAH-lahns), nursed them back to health. Additional Spanish troops arrived to rebuild Cortés's army. In May 1521 he launched another attack against the city of Tenochtitlán. They blockaded the city, keeping out food and drink. With large boats they took control of the lake, and with cannons they destroyed the walls of the city. On June 13, 1521, the Aztec capital fell to the Spanish. This marked the beginning of modern Mexico.

The Result - Mexico is a combination of Indian and Spanish cultures. Cortés chose the site of Tenochtitlán (tay-noach-TEE-tlahn) as the capital of his new domain. This symbolized the building of the new upon the old. He planned for the Spanish to settle in Mexico and instructed his men to either send for their wives in Spain or marry Indian women within eighteen months. Thus began a period of bringing Spanish culture to Mexico. The Spanish believed theirs to be a culture superior to that of the native Indians, while in reality the culture of Mesoamerica was equal to theirs. The Indians became an occupied people exploited by the Spanish conquerors.

The Spanish valued Mexico for its great riches and guarded its resources. During and after the conquest nearly six million Indians were killed or died from European diseases. The Spanish burned hundreds of Indian books and persecuted Indian priests, destroying three thousand years of learning in architecture, mathematics, and astronomy. They imposed their

culture upon the natives including teaching the Indians the Spanish language and converting them to Catholicism.

The entire Indian culture was not destroyed however. Aspects of this culture survive to this day as a testimony of its importance to the Mexican people. The Mexican diet still includes many foods known to the Aztecs including numerous varieties of corn and beans, squash, chilies, tomatoes, avocados, and chocolate. The Aztec and Mayan languages are still spoken in parts of Mexico, and many words from these languages have become part of Mexican Spanish. The form of Roman Catholicism practiced in Mexico has also been influenced by Mexico's Indian heritage. Catholic saints often are identified with the old local gods and goddesses. Even in the folk art and fine art of Mexico, images of the jaguar and the feathered serpent from the Indian past are prominent.

For more information:

Julie Catalano's *The Mexican Americans* included in this trunk, pages 17-22.

Acuña, Rudy. *A Mexican American Chronicle*. New York: American Book Company, 1967.

Casagrande, Louis B. and Sylvia A. Johnson. *Focus on Mexico: Modern Life in an Ancient Land*. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Co., 1986.

VOCABULARY

- **Aztecs** = One of several Indian nations living in Central America at the time of the Spanish explorers' arrival.
- **Bicultural** = Belonging to two distinct cultures.
- **Cortés** = The Spanish explorer credited with conquering the Mexican Indians.
- **Culture** = Shared world view and beliefs of a particular community transmitted through their arts, beliefs, and customs.
- **Eriar** = A man who belongs to one of several religious orders of the Roman Catholic Church.
- **God's eye** = A diamond motif found in cultures throughout the world. The Mexican God's Eye has its origin in an Indian good-luck symbol.
- **Mesoamerica** = Mes or meso means in the middle or intermediate. The land between the Americas, or Central America.
- **Montezuma** = Ruler of the Aztecs at the time of the Spanish explorers' arrival.
- **Our Lady of Guadalupe** = A religious figure in Mexico's Catholic faith, a religion brought by the Spanish. She looks and is dressed in a traditional Indian manner. St. Pius X designated Our Lady of Guadalupe patroness of Latin America, and Pope Pius XII in 1945 declared her patroness of the Americas. Her feast is on December 12 and is a holy day of obligation in Mexico.
- **Quetzalcoatl** = According to Aztec legend, a Toltec ruler whose promise of return assisted the Spanish in gaining a foothold in Mexico.
- **Quinceañera** = A combination of a Native American coming-of-age celebration and a religious ceremony marking a girl's entrance into the church as an adult, with all the responsibilities this includes. This celebration is practiced today in some Mexican American communities. (For more information, see the lesson in this manual on the Quinceañera.)

- Symbol = Something that represents something else.
- Tilma = An Indian garment made from cactus fiber.

PRONUNCIATIONS

- Chichimec (chee-chee-MAKE) = An Indian group that once lived in the region now known as Mexico.
- Huitzilopochtli (wee-tseel-o-POACH-tee) = The Aztec god of war.
- Maya (MAH-yah) = An Indian group that once lived in land now known as Mexico.
- Mexica (may-SHEE-cah) = Another name for the Aztec Indians, a group that once lived in the region now known as Mexico.
- Quetzalcoatl (cay-tsahl-CO-ahtl) = A great ruler of the Toltec Indians.
- Tenochtitlán (tay-noach-TEE-tlahn) = The Aztec capital city that was destroyed by the Spaniards and later rebuilt by Cortés. It is now known as Mexico City.
- Teotihuacán (tay-o-tee-wah-CAHN) = An Indian group that once lived in the region now known as Mexico.

ACTIVITY

- 1) Review the historical background information with the class to familiarize them with the fact the Mexican culture is actually a mixture of Spanish and Mesoamerican Indian cultures. Be sure to include the following points in this review:

Show the class the locations of Spain and Mexico on the world map and briefly describe the two societies at the point in history when they are about to meet.

Spain was a European country that had set a course of expansion. By colonizing the "New World" the rulers of Spain hoped to bring the wealth of the Americas to Spain. Cortés, credited with "conquering" Mexico, was part of this process.

At the time of Cortés's arrival in Mexico a highly complex civilization was in place. It had great cities, elaborate trade routes with other nations, a written language, and more. It was also a culture whose religion was extremely important. The religion of the people ultimately played a role in their downfall.

Introduce the idea that societies or communities exist at many levels. One of the most complex of these is when a society is urbanized and has a written language. Both the Spanish and Indian cultures were highly complex by the 1500s. Ask the class for examples that might show how complex a society is.

These might include the use of the wheel, a written language, a calendar, urbanization (this shows the ability to support and feed people who are not involved in agriculture), the ability to work with metal, and the types of construction techniques used.

Give the class some indication of the complexity level of the Spanish and Mesoamerican

Indian cultures.

They both had written languages, calendars, and effective political and religious systems.

The Indians of Mexico, built pyramids that are still some of the largest in the world, developed a written language, recorded their history and culture in thousands of books, and possessed agricultural systems that allowed them to feed cities with populations up to 200,000.

The Spanish had the ability to use the wheel and work with metal; their art and literature of the period; and the capability to explore the Americas and other places very distant from Spain. They had also recorded their history in thousands of books.

Explain the interaction between the Spanish and the native Indians.

When the Spanish conquered the Aztecs in 1521 the Indians became subject to Spanish rule. While the Spanish valued Mexico's wealth they had no use for the culture of its people and attempted to destroy it. The Spanish saw their culture as superior to that of the Aztecs and imposed the Spanish culture on the natives. The Indians' books and cities were destroyed. The Spaniards also saw the Indians as a convenient labor force and often forced them to dress in European clothes, practice a new religion, learn a new language, and pay tribute to the Spanish crown.

The story of Mexico is the story of how these two cultures meshed together to form a new Mexican culture. Today's Mexico is the combination of two highly complex cultures, the Spanish and the Mesoamerican Indian.

- 2) Despite the fact that the Spanish tried to wipe out the Indian culture, it survived and combined with the transplanted Spanish culture to form the culture of Mexico.

Read the book The Lady of Guadalupe to the class and have them listen for ways in which the Spanish and Indian cultures combined to form a culture unique to Mexico. Things to look for include:

A) Juan Diego is an Indian who took on a Spanish name and converted to Catholicism, a religion that was intertwined with the Spanish government in Spanish culture.

B) Our Lady of Guadalupe told Juan she was the Mother of God, as understood in

Christianity, but she spoke the same Indian language as Juan and dressed in the clothing of an Aztec princess. Show the class the poster of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

C) The image of Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared on Juan's tilma, an Indian garment made from cactus fiber. This Indian garment has become a symbol to the Catholic Church in Mexico.

D) Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Catholic Church's Mother of God, said that she wanted to show love to all the people of the New World but especially to the Indians.

Have the class identify examples of how the two individual cultures, Spanish and Indian, are visible in this book.

These are apparent in a comparison of the clothing of the friars and Indians waiting to see the bishop, the need for an interpreter between the bishop and Juan, and the ancient remedies used to help make Juan's uncle well.

- 3) Our Lady of Guadalupe continues to be a religious symbol of great importance to both Mexicans and Mexican Americans today. That this symbol remains significant today can be seen in graphics #1, 2, and 14. Discuss these images with the class.

#1 and #2 are of a group of Mexican American dancers from Garden City performing the Matachine dance. Much of this dance can be traced to the pre-Spanish Indians of Mexico including the beading on the clothing and the headdresses. Today it is often performed as part of celebrations honoring Our Lady of Guadalupe. Note the use of the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe on their clothing.

#14 is a photo of a volkswagen with the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe painted on the trunk. The owner of this car was in Topeka to participate in Kansas Hispanic Legislative Day.

- 4) The mixture of Indian and Spanish cultures remains evident today in the heritage of both Mexico and the Mexican Americans who have immigrated to the United States.

Ask the class to look at the photos and pick out evidence of both the Indian and Spanish cultures that have merged to become the culture of Mexico heritage.

The image of Mary (our lady or the blessed mother) is a symbol of the Catholic faith brought by the Spanish. Our Lady of Guadalupe is the image of Mary as seen in Mexico by an Aztec convert. Her clothing represents the clothing style of the Indian people.

The headdresses and beading on the adult dancers as well as the bows and arrows they use as part of the dance are signs of the Indian heritage of Mexico. The dance itself is one with roots in the culture of the Indians of Mexico.

Can the class think of other things in the Mexican culture that are examples of the combined cultures of the Spanish and Mexican Indians?

Food = Although the Spanish tried to eradicate the Indian culture, the corn, beans, squash, chilies, tomatoes, avocados, and chocolate familiar to many as traditional Mexican food are from the Mexican Indian culture.

Language = The Mexican language is a Spanish language, but it contains many Indian words. These words are derived from the Aztec language: Chili from chilli, avocado from ahuatl, coyote from coyotl, and chocolate from xocoatl. The following words are derived from the Spanish language: chaps from chaparreras, mustang from mesteno, rodeo from rodear, and bronco from bronco.

Celebrations/Religion = Examples include the quinceanera, god's eye, and Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Explain that the Mexican culture is an example of cultures combining and adapting to form a new one. The Spanish and Indian cultures combined to form a new culture. This new Mexican culture drew from the cultures of both Spain and the native Indians. Traditions from both of these cultures were combined instead of the Indian culture becoming obliterated when the Spanish tried to impose theirs on the native population.

EXTENDED ACTIVITY

- 1) Research aspects from Spanish history such as the Visigoths, Moors, the Spanish Inquisition, or the Black Death; Indian tribes or groups from the area known today as Mexico; or agricultural methods of the Mesoamerica Indians such as the chinampas of the Teotihuacán or irrigation canals.
- 2) Creative Writing - Have the class put themselves on either side of the conquest story, the Indian or the Spanish, and have them write about their reactions to the meeting of these groups as well as the outcome of this meeting.
- 3) Watch the videos included in this trunk. *Hispanic Culture Series: Mexican People and Culture* deals with the culture and history of Mexico, and a portion of the "Traditions" section of *The Hispanic Face of Kansas* (the first part of this tape) deals with Our Lady of

Guadalupe (counter #115).

- 4) Have the class research the foods native to this hemisphere and the role these foods play in the diets of people today.
- 5) See the complementary lessons in this manual: "What is Culture," "Existing Side by Side: Bicultural Communities," "The Aztec Calendar," "Mayan Math," and "Quinceañera."