

# Mexican Roots

## Lesson #5: THE AZTEC CALENDAR

Note: For lower grades consider doing this activity as a cooperative project using small groups instead of individuals to develop a calendar.

### TIME

90 minutes

### MATERIALS FROM TRUNK

Video - *Hispanic Culture Series: Mexican People and Culture*  
Graphics - #8, 9  
Booklet - *The Aztec Cosmos*

### OTHER MATERIALS

TV and VCR, paper and pencils for each student, heavy construction paper or thin cardboard for each student, black crayons, compass, tan tempera paint, crumpled paper towel or sponge, sand

### TEACHER PREPARATIONS

Have paper or cardboard cut for each student to a predetermined size.

### OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to:

- 1) recognize that the Aztec culture was highly civilized
- 2) identify pictographs
- 3) organize and design a personal calendar using the Aztec calendar as a model

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

During the fifteenth century Mexico was an isolated land populated by various Indian tribes. But by the 1500s the Aztec Indians had gained control of central and southern Mexico by conquering and subjugating many of the indigenous tribes of the region.

The Aztecs, who called themselves Mexica (may-SHEE-cah), created a rich and powerful empire. They built pyramids, aqueducts, palatial homes, parks, and zoos. They were accomplished artists, astronomers, engineers, and architects. This thriving civilization soon fell prey to Spanish explorers who were looking for new lands to conquer.

A piece of sculpture dating from the 1400s gives us some indication of the pre-Spanish, Aztec civilization. This huge twenty-six-ton stone, carved with symbols depicting the Aztec universe, calendar, history, and lore, survived the destruction of the Aztec capital city of Tenochtitlan (tay-noach-TEE-tlahn) by the Spanish. The Spanish left the stone on view until December 1559 when Fray Diego de Dúran, second archbishop of Mexico, ordered it buried. It remained buried in this spot for 229 years. At that time it was dug up by accident during

the excavation of a street. Today it resides in the National Museum of Anthropology and History in Mexico City. In the two hundred years since it was dug up, this stone has been one of the most studied and written about single example of Mesoamerican art.

The Aztec culture did not have an alphabet as we know it. It used hieroglyphs to represent an idea. The glyphs depicting names, places, numbers, and objects were relatively easy to decipher. Other glyphs are more difficult to translate as they are abstractions themselves, or refer to intangibles or abstract concepts.

For more information see the booklet *The Aztec Cosmos* and pages 17-20 in the book *The Mexican Americans* by Julie Catalano. Both of these are included in this trunk.

## VOCABULARY

- **Abstract** = Expressing a quality apart from an object.
- **Glyphs** = A symbol that conveys information nonverbally, such as a curved arrow on a road sign.
- **Hieroglyph** = A picture or symbol that stands for a word, sound, or idea.
- **Mesoamerica** = Mes or meso means in the middle or intermediate. Land between the Americas or Central America.

## ACTIVITY

- 1) Show the first section of the video *Hispanic Culture Series: Mexican People and Culture*. This section is titled "Mexican People and Culture" and runs approximately twelve minutes. Stop the tape when you reach "Part Two: The Mexicans".
  
- 2) After viewing the video briefly discuss with the class the advanced state of the Indian civilizations in Mexico at the time of the Spanish arrival in Mexico.  
*They built rich and powerful empires; were accomplished artists, astronomers, engineers, and architects; and had a written language.*
  
- 3) Show the class graphic #8, the image of the Aztec calendar. Explain the calendar to the class.  
*A - The complicated symbols around the edge of the calendar represent months, and the two Fire Serpents represent the universe that surrounds the earth.*  
  
*B - The present age, or Sun, is represented by the second circle marked at its edge by pairs of triangles.*  
  
*C - Inside this circle is the calendar itself, the "Count of Days."*  
  
*D - The four face panels near the center illustrate the four epochs, the four past suns, of the earth's existence. The center face is*

*thought to represent the fifth and present sun.*

Explain that the Aztec culture did not use letters as we know them today. Instead they used hieroglyphs to represent ideas. Show the class graphic #9, Cipactli, the first day, and Atl, the ninth day, examples of Aztec hieroglyphs. Both of these images can be found in 'C', the "Count of Days," on graphic #8, the Aztec Calendar. Discuss the role of glyphs, graphic images, in communicating thoughts and concepts.

*These are glyphs depicting the first day of the calendar, Cipactli (the Earth Monster), and the ninth day, Atl (water).*

Ask the class if they can give an example of how we use glyphs in our world.

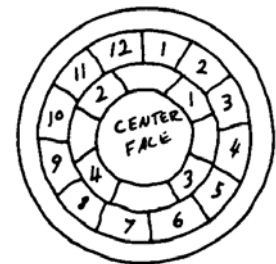
*Examples include road sign symbols such as a curved arrow representing a curve in the road.*

Have each student think of one or two important events for each year of their lives. Consider learning to walk and talk; the birth of siblings; the arrival of pets; moving to a new house, school, or town; etc. Have each student draw pictures to symbolize the important events identified in his/her life and label these. These may be posted in a central location so that students can draw from the ideas of others when creating their calendars.

4) Have the class design calendars for their lives.

**Use a black crayon for all drawing.**

- **Making the Circles** - Using a compass, have the students draw four circles, one inside the other, on their pieces of cardboard or construction paper.
- **Center** - In this area draw the current era (see center of "D" on graphic #8).
- **Second Circle** - Draw four boxes. In these boxes draw the sun characters or symbols for each god (see "D" in graphic #8).
- **Third Circle** - Divide this circle into twelve sections, one for each month of the year. Draw a symbol for each month. Examples might include a snowflake for January and fireworks for July.
- **Outer Circle** - Decorate the outer circle with the important life symbols each student previously made as hieroglyphs.
- **Finishing the Calendar** - Sponge paint lightly over the drawings to create the texture of stone. Use either a sponge or a crumpled paper towel.



While the paint is wet sprinkle the "stone" lightly with sand.

### EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

- 1) Have the class research the Aztec calendar and the glyphs included in it. The booklet *The Aztec Cosmos* included in this trunk will be a good place to begin.
- 2) See the complementary lessons in this manual: "Mexicans: Old Roots, Young People," and "Mayan Math."

- 3) Have your class head south of the border on a pretend trip to Mexico. Stimulate interest by displaying a map of North America and labeling Kansas and Mexico; use the Mexican colors of green, white, and red for highlights; provide an assortment of Mexican travel brochures available from local travel agents; decorate the display with paper flowers or luminarias. Have each student pick out a Mexican destination, find out information about his/her destination, and pack for the trip using pictures cut out from magazines and catalogs. (See below for instructions for making a suitcase.) The students want to use travel magazines or travel brochures to get ideas of what they could expect in Mexico. Start the students on their imaginary trip by encouraging everyone to close their eyes and picture themselves engaged in activities surrounding his/her departure such as loading luggage, riding to the airport, checking in luggage, etc. Once the "plane" has reached a cruising altitude have them open their eyes and study the materials they have collected about Mexico. Serve tortilla chips before having the students close their eyes and to prepare for the landing. Once they've landed each student can share information and pictures of their destination. Consider playing Mexican music, viewing a film of Mexican dances or other Mexican art forms, or sampling Mexican food prepared ahead of time. Have the class board the plane for their return trip. On the flight home they can brainstorm an "alphabetical collection" of Mexican souvenirs.
  
- 4) Have the class discover more about the Aztecs through books such as *The Fifth and Final Sun: An Ancient Aztec Myth of the Sun's Origin* by C. Shana Greger; *Life in the Times of Moctezuma and the Aztecs* by Roy Burrell; *Aztecs* by Jill Hughes; *The Hungry Woman: Myths and Legends of the Aztecs* by John Bierhorst; and *The Flame of Peace: A Tale of the Aztecs* by Deborah Nourse Lattimore.
  
- 5) Have the class research the Aztec people and their culture. Once they have gained some familiarity with the Aztecs have the students design a symbol that they might have put on a calendar depicting their lives and write about why this symbol was important in their lives.

