

Aztec 101

By Vickie Chao

1 Legend has it that a long time ago there was a group of people from Aztlán wandering around Central America. Those people had no homes. They traveled from one place to another, hoping to find a good place to settle down. They had no idea where they should turn next. They only knew that their most divine god had promised them land and had given them a clue to find it. One day, they arrived at the shore of Lake Texcoco. They saw an eagle devouring a snake while perching atop a cactus. (This image is now the coat of arms of Mexico, featured at the center of its national flag.) Upon seeing that, they recognized that this was the clue they had been searching for. Right then and there, they put down their things and stopped their wandering. They laid a foundation and began building a city. They called their new home Tenochtitlan (the present-day Mexico City). From there, they went on to establish a formidable empire and created a wonderful culture. Their empire lasted for nearly 300 years. And their culture left a deep imprint in the region which is still clear today.



2 Do you know who those people were?

3 They were the Aztecs or Mexicas.

4 The Aztecs had a mysterious past. Though they claimed that they came from Aztlán originally, we do not really know where that place was. (Many thought it was in north or northwest Mexico.) And we have no idea what prompted them to leave their homeland at the turn of the 12th century. In their search for a new home, did they actually see an eagle devouring a snake while perching atop a cactus? Perhaps, but we cannot say for sure. The truth is that we know almost nothing about the Aztecs and their early history. We only know that they settled near Lake Texcoco around 1250. And they founded Tenochtitlan around 1325.

5 The Aztecs spoke a language called Nahuatl. Their main activity was farming. Like many other tribes in the region, they favored the slash-and-burn approach. This type of farming involved cutting down all the trees in a field and setting them on fire. Once the area was cleared, the Aztecs then planted their crops. But because they had limited holdings of land, they had to look for creative ways to build new farms. Their solution was to make man-made islands or *chinampas*. A *chinampa* was a giant reed mat set upon the

shallow portion of Lake Texcoco. It was covered with soil and anchored to the ground by plant roots. On top of the mat, the Aztecs grew all sorts of vegetation such as corn and tomatoes. Using this method, they were able to reclaim enough land to support the ever growing population, most of whom were farmers.

⁶ Farmers, traders, and artisans were the commoners (called *macehualtin*; singular *macehualli*) in the Aztec society. They were sandwiched between slaves (called *tlacotin*) and nobility (called *pilli*). Back in those days, slavery could happen to anybody. For example, if a man owed money, he would become a temporary slave until he paid off his debt. If a soldier was caught as a POW, he would be sold as a slave but had the option of buying back his freedom. Since the arrangement was not hereditary, the children of a slave were free at birth. As for the noble class, it consisted of high-ranking government officials and priests. Just like the other two classes, it was not hereditary. If a commoner or a slave worked hard enough, he could very well rise to the top of the society and become a nobleman himself. Regardless of a person's gender and standing in the society, everybody began school at the age of 15. Some would go to a *telpochcalli* to learn practical skills such as crafts and fighting. Others would join a *calmecac* to gain advanced knowledge such as astronomy, writing, and religious rites. The *calmecac* school accepted male pupils only.

⁷ The Aztecs were very religious people. They were most infamous for their practice of human sacrifices. Depending upon the occasion, some human sacrifices could be of a very large scale. For example, at a religious celebration in 1487, the Aztecs were said to have offered the lives of 84,400 people (mainly criminals and POWs) over a period of four days. If this report was true, it meant that they would have had to execute 15 people per minute non-stop for four days straight. Considering that the claim was made by the Aztecs themselves, it is very likely that they had inflated the figure to create fear among the neighboring tribes. Did the tactic work? You bet it did!

⁸ The Aztec Empire reached its height during the days of Ahuitzontl. He ruled the kingdom from 1486 to 1502. After he passed away, his son Moctezuma II took over. He had no idea then that an even more formidable enemy would come to challenge the Aztecs very soon. In 1519, Herman (or Hernan) Cortés and his fellow Spaniards landed on the Gulf Coast. They allied themselves with a local tribe called Tlaxcala. Together, they sacked the capital city of Tenochtitlan on August 13, 1531, and brought the mighty Aztec Empire to its knees.



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<p>1. Where was the Aztec Empire?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> A In Central America</p> <p><input type="radio"/> B In North America</p> <p><input type="radio"/> C In South America</p> <p><input type="radio"/> D In Northern Europe</p>	<p>2. Which of the following is the middle class in the Aztec society?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> A <i>pilli</i></p> <p><input type="radio"/> B <i>macehualtin</i></p> <p><input type="radio"/> C <i>tlacotin</i></p>
<p>3. Where was the legendary ancestral home of the Aztecs?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> A Aztlán</p> <p><input type="radio"/> B Lake Texcoco</p> <p><input type="radio"/> C Machu Picchu</p> <p><input type="radio"/> D Tikal</p>	<p>4. Which of the following about the Aztec Empire is true?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> A It was conquered by Christopher Columbus.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> B Its capital city was Aztlán.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> C It was infamous for its practice of human sacrifice.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> D Its people settled nearby Lake Texcoco around 1325.</p>
<p>5. What did the Aztecs do to increase the acreage of land they could use for farming?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> A They made islands in Lake Texcoco.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> B They built stepped pyramids and grew crops on each layer.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> C They leased unused land from the neighboring tribes.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> D All of the above</p>	<p>6. Who defeated the Aztec Empire?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> A Zheng He</p> <p><input type="radio"/> B James Cook</p> <p><input type="radio"/> C Christopher Columbus</p> <p><input type="radio"/> D Herman (Hernan) Cortés</p>

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| <p>7. What is a <i>chinampa</i>?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="radio"/> A A man-made island for agriculture<input type="radio"/> B A type of irrigation scheme<input type="radio"/> C A type of plant<input type="radio"/> D A ritual for human sacrifice | <p>8. Which of the following about the Aztecs is true?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="radio"/> A The Aztecs had a mandatory educational system.<input type="radio"/> B All Aztecs knew how to read and write.<input type="radio"/> C Children of a nobleman went to a <i>calmecac</i>, whereas children of a commoner attended a <i>telpochcalli</i>.<input type="radio"/> D The Aztec girls had to drop out of schools after they turned 15 years old. |
| <p>9. Which of the following about slavery in the Aztec Empire is not true?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="radio"/> A A man who fell behind on his bills could become a temporary slave.<input type="radio"/> B A slave in the Aztec Empire could buy back his or her own freedom.<input type="radio"/> C The Aztecs only used their slaves for human sacrifices.<input type="radio"/> D The son of a slave was a freeman at birth. | <p>10. Which of the following about the Aztec Empire is not true?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="radio"/> A It was a formidable empire in Central America.<input type="radio"/> B It lasted for nearly 300 years.<input type="radio"/> C Its capital city is the present-day Mexico City.<input type="radio"/> D It was founded by Ahuitzontl. |

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Apart from the Aztecs' practice of human sacrifices, think of another unique custom from any other culture in the world. Describe the custom, and explain its origin.

Aztec 101 - Answer Key

- 1 A In Central America
- 2 B *macehualtin*
- 3 A Aztlán
- 4 C It was infamous for its practice of human sacrifice.
- 5 A They made islands in Lake Texcoco.
- 6 D Herman (Hernan) Cortés
- 7 A A man-made island for agriculture
- 8 A The Aztecs had a mandatory educational system.
- 9 C The Aztecs only used their slaves for human sacrifices.
- 10 D It was founded by Ahuitzontl.