

History of aztecs

[History](#), [Ancient History](#)



From the start of the 1300s to the early 1500s, central Mexico was dominated by a Mesoamerican culture called the Aztecs. Previously inhabited by the Toltecs, the land left behind was marshy. While exploring the land, the Aztecs saw an eagle perched on a cactus. This was taken as a sign to start their culture here (Aztecs). After years of growth, this community quickly grew into an empire.

The Aztec empire was divided into 3 city states and many different ethnic groups and religious beliefs. These city states all had different beliefs and values, but one cultural practice that was consistent throughout was the Aztec sacrifice. Aztec culture believed it was their duty to please the gods, and that the fate of the universe depended on it. This was a big example that religion was a big part of the Aztec culture and that the Aztecs would do anything for their gods. This strength of religion caused boundaries to be set, however, also helped the downfall and eventual end of the Aztec empire.

Within Aztec religion, the gods were made up of a hierarchy. Starting with 3 main gods, followed by 4 more gods and finally followed by an infinite amount of gods. Most of these gods required sacrifices. These sacrifices were very expressive of the values, beliefs and boundaries of the Aztecs. All were eligible for sacrifice, as even some gods required children. These sacrifices happened often too, as one was needed at the end of each month, which in Aztec culture, happened 18 times in each ' cycle'.

Due to this, the number of people needed to sacrifice was substantial, so there were many methods to bringing people in. First, the Aztecs would use any prisoners that they could capture from wars they fought in. But, the

Aztecs didn't fight in enough wars to fulfill all the sacrificial needs. In order to get the right amount of people, the Aztecs held "Flower Wars" ("10 Horrors of Aztec Ritual Human Sacrifice").

These wars were fought by different Mesoamerican cities and was also used for combat training. If one were to die during the war, it would be a noble death. However, during most wars, the plan was not to kill enemies but to injure. But, if any enemies were captured, they would be used for sacrifice. Next, some Aztec people believed that the act of sacrifice was holy and volunteered. In fact, some Aztec prisoners were unhappy that they could not die a noble death after being saved.

This is a good depiction of how the Aztecs viewed and worshipped gods. Nevertheless, all of these sacrifices had their benefits and disadvantages. While the Aztecs were performing all of the sacrifices to sustain the universe, they were also halting the growth and expansion of their empire. At an estimated 50,000 sacrifices per year, it is interesting to think how the Aztecs would have survived if they did not execute all these people. This kind of treatment was actually necessary to complete some sacrifices.

Some sacrificial festivals celebrated by the Aztecs had more implications than just a sacrifice. For example, Tlacaxipehualiztli and Toxcatl were similar in the way that they selected one man to be treated like a god. During Tlacaxipehualiztli, or "The Festival of the Flaying of Men", one man is picked to dress like the Aztec god Xipe Totec, whose name translates to "The Flayed One" ("10 Horrors of Aztec Ritual Human Sacrifice").

For the 40 days leading up to the festival, the chosen one is blanketed in feathers and jewels to resemble The Flayed One. Finally, when the day of the festival arrives, the chosen one and eight other impersonators of god were killed. Following the killing, the priests would skin the corpses and dye them yellow. The skins were either given to the priests to dance in or to young men who would spend the next 20 days begging. Next, the Festival of Toxcatl had special requirements based on looks to determine who could dress up like the god Tezcatlipoca. The chosen one needed to have smooth skin and straight, long hair.

Once chosen, his skin would be painted black and he was given a flower crown, seashell breastplate and lots of jewelry to wear. Along with this, he was given four wives. The only thing he needed to do was go through town playing a flute and smelling flowers so the people could honor him. After 12 months, it was time for the sacrifice. The chosen one would then walk up the stairs of a great pyramid. On his walk up to the top, he would break all of his flutes. Once at the top, a priest helped lay him down.

From that point on they would begin to rip his heart out of his body.

Believing all of this was necessary to please the gods, everything the Aztecs did perfectly portrayed their values and beliefs. No one in their right mind would want to get their heart ripped out, but if you were an Aztec and it would please a god, anything goes. This gives a good sense to the relationship between individual and group in the Aztec community. While within the smaller states in Aztec culture, warriors were the most respected.

However, in the bigger picture of the community, the main goal is to please the gods. With this it was easy to find a role.

In Fredrik Barth's *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, he explains how when a community focuses, "...on what is socially effective, ethnic groups are seen as a form of social organization (Barth). In *The Multicultural Riddle*, Gerd Baumann says that religion "...provides a point of orientation, and it always points to the same objective pole." (Chegg). There is a connection between this and the Aztecs as their constant objective pole was nourishment of the gods. The Aztecs focused on pleasing and nourishing the gods, making it easy for them.

This also ties into the boundaries of the Aztecs. Their boundaries expanded as far as their god needed it to. A prime example is cannibalism. Anyone today would think eating someone after you sacrificed them would be crazy; but the Aztecs accepted that because their gods allowed it. However, in *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, by Anthony Cohen, Cohen states that some rituals, "...would be unable to recognize much of its symbolism." (Cohen). This inability causes a boundary between everyone and the Aztecs.

The Aztec empire fell in the early 1500s. There were many factors to this fall, but it was coming. After the Spanish invaded, the diseases they brought wiped out 80% of the Aztec population (Aztec History). This speaks a lot about how the perceptions and actions of outsiders affected the Aztecs. Today, the Aztecs are only history to the larger world. However, the Aztecs set many examples for their predecessors.

The execution of multiple city states and an excellent economy led the way. During the peak years of the Aztec empire, some Aztec markets were visited by over 50, 000 people a day. This was plenty to keep the economy going steadily. However, since the Aztecs are from the 1300s to the 1500s, they did not have the socio-political boundaries of a nation state. For someone that lives in a nation state, this quote by Baumann in *The Multicultural Riddle* explains how the Aztecs solve their own problem.

The quote says that “ Religious conviction is the oldest problem of the modern nation-state.” (Baumann). If we are considering the Aztecs though, there is no religious problem within their entire empire. Nevertheless, the Aztec religion had its downfalls. With all the sacrifices, the Aztecs diminished what could have been a massive empire. While it was not the main reason for the end of the empire, it sure did not help that the gods required so many people.

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