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FOKLORE & LANGUAGE

TENOCHTITLÁN AND THE VIRGIN OF GUADALUPE

The legends of Mexico, like the legends of other countries, embody cultural values and ideas. Many Mexican legends come from the ancient civilizations of Mexico’s past; others come from more recent times, such as those related to Catholicism. Two important legends are those of Tenochtitlán [ten-oh-cheet-lahn] and the Virgin of Guadalupe [gwad-ah-loop-ay].

Starting Points

1. Did you know Egypt is not the only place with pyramids? Thousands of years ago, the ancestors of many modern-day Mexicans built great cities in the Americas with huge pyramids (see Folklore & Language Visual 1). The stories of the ancient people who built the pyramids continue to be told today as the Mexican people remember their past.

2. Do you know what the colors of your country’s flag symbolize? Find a collection of the world’s flags (see Additional Resources). Can you find the Mexican flag? Which flags are similar to Mexico’s flag? Do the same colors symbolize the same things on different flags? On the Mexican flag, not only its color has meaning, but its emblem does, too.

3. Why do we like to remember our ancestors? Do you ever hear stories about your grandparents or great grandparents? Share some stories with the class. Stories are important to the Mexican people because they help explain why things are the way they are.

Information

Legends

Legends are stories that are passed from generation to generation by storytellers. Since they are not usually written down, many different versions of the legend arise over time. The native people that lived in Mexico during ancient times had many legends that explained how certain things came to be, such as aspects of nature or the creation of the world. Through learning and telling these stories, Mexicans preserve their history and remember their heritage.

The Legend of Tenochtitlán

One important legend in Mexican culture is depicted by the emblem on the national flag (see Flag of Mexico). This emblem represents the story of founding the capital of the Aztec empire by the ancient Aztec people.

Many years ago there was an ancient tribe called the Aztecs that lived in northern Mexico. They did not fit in with the other tribes and longed to live in a land they could call their own. The main god of the Aztecs was named Huitzilopochtli.
[weet-see-loh-pech-tah-lee]. One day Huitzilopochtli revealed to the tribe a place where they could live in peace. He showed them a vision of a big lake, and there was an island in the middle with a prickly pear cactus growing on it. An eagle was perched on top of the cactus with a live snake in its mouth. Huitzilopochtli told the Aztecs that in order to live in peace, they would have to find the island that he had shown them.

After many years of wandering, the Aztecs found the place from the vision. On a small, swampy island in Lake Texcoco [teks-co-co], they saw an eagle with a snake in its mouth perched on a prickly pear cactus. The Aztecs built a great city in this place and named it Tenochtitlán, which means “The Place of the Prickly Pear Cactus.”

Tenochtitlán was the capital city of the Aztec empire for hundreds of years until it was conquered by Hernán Cortés and his men in the sixteenth century. Although the new settlers destroyed Tenochtitlán, a new city was built on top of it (see Folklore & Language Visual 2). This city is Mexico City, the capital of Mexico, and it has become one of the largest cities in the world.

Symbols of the Mexican Flag
To celebrate the founding of Tenochtitlán, the Mexican flag bears an emblem symbolizing the vision Huitzilopochtli showed to the Aztecs. The colors in the Mexican flag are also symbolic. Green represents hope; white represents purity, honesty, and unity; and red represents parenthood and the blood of national heroes.

The Legend of the Virgin of Guadalupe
Today, Roman Catholicism is the prominent religion in Mexico. While most Catholics believe that one should worship only God, most Mexican Catholics worship and pray to the Virgin Mary as well. She is considered to be the “mother of Mexico.” The story of Mary’s first appearance, a vision given to a poor native farmer, has become a symbol of Mary’s love and compassion for the Mexican people.

On 12 December 1531, an Aztec farmer named Juan Diego was walking near Mexico City where an ancient Aztec temple dedicated to the earth goddess Tonantzín [tone-ant-seen] once existed. Suddenly, he saw a vision of a beautiful woman with both Aztec and Spanish features; she was the Virgin Mary (see Folklore & Language Visual 3). She directed him to go to Mexico City to tell church officials to build a church in her name. Juan Diego followed her instructions, but the church officials did not believe that the Virgin Mary had appeared to the lowly farmer. They asked for proof that the miracle actually happened.

Juan Diego returned to the hillside, and when the Virgin appeared again, he asked her for a sign. Even though roses do not naturally bloom in central Mexico during December, beautiful red roses miraculously bloomed before Juan Diego’s eyes. He gathered them into his rough tilma [teal-mah], or blanket, and took them to Mexico City. When he opened his tilma for the church officials, they fell to their knees in amazement. There, imprinted on the humble blanket of Juan Diego, was the image of the Virgin Mary, exactly as Juan Diego had seen her (see Folklore & Language Visual 4). It is said that this image was so perfect and detailed that the reflection of Juan Diego could be seen in the eyes of the Virgin. Because the Virgin was seen by an Aztec and because her features are mestizo [meh-stee-so], or mixed race, she symbolizes the union of indigenous and Catholic beliefs.
Activities

1. Play a game of telephone. Sit in a circle, and have someone start the game by whispering a short sentence to the person next to him or her. Pass the message around the circle until it reaches the last person. Have the last person repeat what was whispered in his or her ear to the whole circle. Then have the person who started the game repeat the sentence that he or she began the game with. How has the message changed by the time it reached the end? Discuss how this activity represents the way legends change as they are passed on orally.

2. Make your own miniature Mexican flag (see Folklore & Language Visual 5). You will need some popsicle sticks (6–8 inches long), scissors, glue, and crayons or markers. Color the flag. Make sure the order of the colors is correct. (Green is closest to the glue space). Cut out the flag along the dotted lines. Cover the glue space lightly with glue and carefully and evenly wrap it around one end of a popsicle stick. Hold the paper and popsicle stick tightly until the glue is dry.

3. Practice saying the names of the Aztec people and places in the legend of Tenochtitlán and the Virgin of Guadalupe (see Folklore & Language Visual 6). While the official language of Mexico is Spanish, many indigenous languages still survive today (one surviving Aztec language is called Nahuatl [nah-wah-tahl]). Look at a map of Mexico (see Map of Mexico), and see if you can guess which city names are Spanish and which are Aztec.

4. Draw a picture of the Virgin Mary just as you think the picture on the inside of Juan Diego’s blanket would have looked. Imagine what it would be like to travel a long way just to see that picture.

5. Write your own legends about how something came to be. For example, write about how the camel got its hump or how a large body of water was formed (e.g., how the Great Salt Lake became salty, how the Mississippi River became so wide, or how San Francisco Bay got its shape). Then design a flag based on your legend.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some legends you know? How do they help explain events?

2. What are some reasons people pass legends on from generation to generation? How do these stories affect us today?

3. Do you believe the legends of Tenochtitlán and the Virgin of Guadalupe? Why or why not? Have you ever heard different versions of these stories?

4. Are legends completely true, completely false, or something in between? Why is it important to understand that legends can never be proven true or false? What can we do or say if we don’t believe a story is true, but we know that someone else believes it is true?

5. Like the Mexican flag, most countries’ flags display symbolic colors or pictures. Why do you think this is so? What does your country’s flag represent?

6. Can we learn from legends even if we don’t believe them? How?
**Facts about Mexico**

**Official Name:** Estados Unidos Mexicanos (United Mexican States)

**Capital:** Mexico Distrito Federal (Mexico City)

**Government Type:** federal republic

**Area:** 1,972,550 sq km

**Land Boundaries:** Belize 250 km; Guatemala 962 km; United States 3,141 km

**Climate:** varies from tropical to desert

**Terrain:** high, rugged mountains; low coastal plains; high plateaus; desert

**Lowest Point:** Laguna Salada –10 m

**Highest Point:** Volcan Pico de Orizaba 5,700 m

**Natural Resources:** petroleum, silver, copper, gold, lead, zinc, natural gas, and timber

**Natural Hazards:** tsunamis along the Pacific coast; volcanoes and destructive earthquakes in the center and south; and hurricanes on the Pacific, Gulf of Mexico, and Caribbean coasts

**Population:** 107,449,525 (2006 est.)

**Ethnic Groups:** mestizo (Amerindian-Spanish) 60%, Amerindian or predominantly Amerindian 30%, white 9%, other 1%

**Religions:** nominally Roman Catholic 89%, Protestant 6%, other 5%

**Languages:** Spanish, various Mayan, Nahuatl, and other regional indigenous languages

**GDP:** $1.134 trillion (2006 est.)

**GDP Per Capita:** $10,600 (2006 est.)

**GDP Composition By Sector:** agriculture 3.9%, industry 25.7%, services 70.5% (2006)

**Labor Force:** 38.09 million (2006 est.)

**Unemployment Rate:** 3.2% plus underemployment of perhaps 25% (2006 est.)

**Industries:** food and beverages, tobacco, chemicals, iron and steel, petroleum, mining, textiles, clothing, motor vehicles, consumer durables, and tourism

**Agricultural Products:** corn, wheat, soybeans, rice, beans, cotton, coffee, fruit, tomatoes, beef, poultry, dairy products, and wood products

**Exports:** $248.8 billion f.o.b. (2006) manufactured goods, oil and oil products, silver, fruits, vegetables, coffee, and cotton

**Imports:** $253.1 billion f.o.b. (2006) metalworking machines, steel mill products, agricultural machinery, electrical equipment, car parts for assembly, repair parts for motor vehicles, aircraft, and aircraft parts

**Trade Partners:** United States, China, Japan, Canada, and Spain

**Currency:** Mexican peso (MXN)

**Exchange Rate:** 11.024 MXN = $1 U.S. (2006)
Folklore & Language Visual 1: Pyramid at Teotihuacan—North of Mexico City