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HISTORY

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PAST

The attitudes and actions of most Mexicans have been influenced by the following four
major historic periods: pre-Hispanic, colonial, independent, and modern. Influences from
each of these periods have affected food, family bloodlines and traditions, and ideas
about independence.

Starting Points

1. On a piece of paper, write down your eye color and the eye color of your parents,
   brothers, sisters, and friends. Why do different people have different eye colors? In
   Mexico many people have dark brown eyes because of their ancestry.

2. Where are your ancestors from? The Mexican people are descendants of both the
   indigenous people of Mexico and the Spanish who conquered Mexico five hundred
   years ago.

3. What are some typical physical characteristics of Americans? What cultures are these
   characteristics inherited from? Most of the physical characteristics of Mexicans are a
   mixture of European and indigenous characteristics.

Information

The Indigenous People before the Arrival of the Spanish

Before Hernando Cortéz of Spain arrived in Mexico in 1521, most of the people in Mexico
were Indians. The people living in the valley of modern-day Mexico City were called the
Mexicas [meh-hee-cahs] or Aztecas [ahs-tek-ahs] (see History Visuals 1–3). The physical
characteristics of the Mexican people today are inherited from their indigenous ancestry.
Many Mexicans have tan skin; straight, dark hair; and dark brown eyes.

The ancient Aztecs cultivated corn, tomatoes, potatoes, avocados, cocoa, chicle, rubber,
beans, and other crops unfamiliar to the Europeans. Today many of these foods, especially
coffee and chocolate, are popular worldwide. Corn, which some archaeologists say was
first domesticated and eaten five thousand years ago, is originally from Mexico City. Corn
is very important to Mexicans, and they use it to make tortillas [tor-tee-yahs], quesadillas
[kay-sah-dee-yahs], atole [ah-toh-lay], and other traditional dishes.

The family unit was very important to indigenous Mexicans, and roles within the family
were and since have been divided according to gender; in fact, these divisions still exist
today. Most women are the primary nuturers of their children, while the men support their
families financially.

Religion was also a very important part of the indigenous Mexican culture. In the past, reli-
gion affected the Mexican government, social hierarchy, and societal roles. Today, although
the dominant religion is Catholicism instead of an indigenous Mexican religion, most
indigenous Mexicans still look to their religion for protection and blessings and acknowledge the importance of religion in their daily lives.

**A Spanish Mexico**

The conquest of what is now known as Mexico has also greatly influenced the character of the Mexican people. The conquest allowed two very important civilizations to come together: the indigenous Aztecs and the Spanish.

When Cortéz arrived in the Americas, the Aztecs already possessed a large empire and had control over other groups of indigenous people in the region. Cortéz spoke with the emperor of the Aztecs, Moctezuma [mock-tay-soo-mah], in the great capital city of Tenochtitlán [ten-och-teet-lahn] and became a friend of the Aztecs (see **History Visuals 4 and 5**). However, Cortéz also befriended the enemies of the Aztecs, and he eventually succeeded in pitting the Aztecs and their enemies against one other. Cortéz and his Spanish troops took advantage of their friendship with the Aztecs once the two groups were fighting and conquered the Aztecs.

**The Catholic Conquest**

The Catholic Church also has a strong influence on the traditions and beliefs of Mexicans today (see **History Visuals 6 and 7**). When Spanish settlers came to Mexico, they brought Catholic clergymen to Christianize the indigenous people. Sometimes, if the people did not convert, they were killed. Because of the influence of the Catholic clergymen, Catholicism is the predominant religion in Mexico today.

In order to teach indigenous people the doctrines of the church, the Spanish invented new traditions like the piñata [peen-yah-tah] (see **History Visual 8**). The colorful, attractive piñatas represent the evils of the world. The piñata lesson teaches that if a person will fight against bad things, even if the bad things are outwardly attractive, he or she will receive blessings, which, in the case of the piñata, come in the form of candy, fruit, and toys. Children and adults in Mexico celebrate many different holidays and special events by breaking piñatas.

**Piñata Instructions**

**Tips before you start:**
1. Wear clothes that can get dirty.
2. Find an area that can get messy and be easily cleaned up.

**You will need:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 big balloon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>newspaper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 C flour</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 C water</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 C sugar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thin paper in various colors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cardboard (optional)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>candy and fruit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>string or rope</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a stick, bat, or broomstick</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Preparation**

1. Boil water. Once the water is boiling, add sugar.
2. Mix the flour with two cups of cold water in a separate bowl. When the mixture is completely blended, pour it into the pot of sugar water. Allow the liquid to boil for one minute. The result is called **engrudo** [ehn-groo-doe]. Engrudo works well to make piñatas.
because it is sticky and becomes very hard when it dries. Let the mixture cool for a few minutes.
3. Tear the newspaper into small pieces, about four inches by five inches.
4. Blow up the balloon.
5. Put some engrudo on one side of the newspaper and then stick it on the balloon. Cover the entire balloon with newspaper using this method. Wait ten to fifteen minutes and then repeat. Cover the whole balloon with at least three layers of newspaper and engrudo.
6. Plan a design for the piñata. If you want to make a star, take some lightweight cardboard and roll it into cone shapes. You will need five similar cones. Tape them to the balloon.
7. Once you finish shaping the piñata, use the colored paper to decorate it. Use the same engrudo to stick the paper onto the piñata.
8. Set the piñata on a large can to dry. The less contact it has with other objects while it is in the drying stage, the better.
9. When the piñata is dry, poke two small holes in the top. String a long piece of thin rope through the holes and tie the piñata on with a knot. Keep the other end of the rope free.
10. Cut a small flap in the side, near the top. Make it big enough to put the treats in, but not so big that it will be easy to break open. Fill the piñata with treats, and tape the flap back together.
11. Hang the rope over the branch of a tree. If you want, have someone hold the end of the rope over the branch and move the piñata up and down to make it harder to hit. If you choose to have someone hold the rope, take care that the person is out of the way so that he or she does not get hit.
12. Blindfold the first participant. Give the person a stick and tell the other students to stand back. Allow each student to take one or two hits blindfolded until someone breaks open the piñata!

Other Catholic Influences

There are many other Catholic traditions that have become part of the Mexican culture. When a baby is born, the parents take the child to the nearest Catholic church to be baptized. When children are between nine and twelve years old, they are dressed in white and are presented to God as part of their first Catholic ceremony, or Communion. When people get married, they marry inside the church so God will recognize the marriage. When someone is in trouble, women light candles to saints and recite Padre Nuestro [pah-dreh new-ehs-tro] or Ave Maria [ah-bay mah-ree-ah] prayers to ask for blessings. When people are close to death, the Catholic father comes, and they confess their sins to him. When people die, their bodies are taken into a church and sprinkled with holy water.

These are some of the Mexican traditions that have been handed down from the colonization period and the introduction of Catholicism. Although there are many people in Mexico that are not Catholic or are Catholic in name only, these people still usually participate in cultural activities introduced by the Catholic church, such as Christmas celebrations, piñatas, and Christmas nativities.
Ideas about Independence
In 1810, the people of Mexico declared their independence from Spanish rule. Before Mexican independence, most people of Spanish descent believed that the indigenous people were worth less than the Spaniards and Europeans. However, Mexican independence brought with it ideas about the worth of every individual, the individual’s right to protection and progress, the right of ownership, and the right to work. For many Mexicans, the concept of equality among humans, regardless of race, came with the realization of political independence.

Modern Pop Culture
With the advent of globalization, the world is becoming more connected at an amazing rate. For example, in the United States, tacos and burritos are now as common as hamburgers and hot dogs. Just as students in the United States learn about the people of Mexico, students in Mexico learn about the people in the United States and other parts of the world through the Internet, television, and other mediums of communication. Most young people in Mexico today enjoy the pop culture prevalent around the world. They listen to music from the United States, Venezuela, Spain, and other countries.

Many of the children of Mexico go to school and learn about people in other places of the world. They learn the same kinds of things that children in the United States learn today. They like many of the same things that other children do, like swimming, dancing, playing with their friends, and spending time with their families.

Activities
1. In small groups discuss or research what people used to do on a daily basis in the countries your ancestors are from. Then play charades as a class, acting out the activities you identified.
2. Play Hangman using Spanish vocabulary from the lesson as the words to guess.
3. Make a piñata and take turns trying to break it open.
4. In small groups discuss the ways that Mexican culture has influenced culture in the United States. What are some example of Mexican influences in food, music, and language?
5. Imagine you are an ancient indigenous Mexican boy or girl at the time of the Spanish conquest. Write in your journal about what things were like before the Spanish conquered the land. How is life different for you now?

Discussion Questions
1. Identify some objects in the classroom that were made in Mexico. How would your life be different if you didn’t have these items? How has Mexico influenced the United States?
3. What has Spanish culture contributed to Mexican culture? What has Mexican culture contributed to other parts of the world? List the pros and cons of the Spanish conquering the Aztecs.

4. If you were an Aztec, would you have wanted to become Catholic? Why or why not?

5. The piñata is an important part of many Mexican celebrations. What are some of your favorite traditions from celebrations in the United States? Why are traditions important to a culture?

6. Why do you think Mexico declared its independence from Spain? How do you think modern Mexico would be different if it were still ruled by Spain? How might it be the same?