



CULTUREGUIDE

MEXICO

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY
KENNEDY CENTER
FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

MEXICO CULTUREGUIDE

This unit is published by the Intercultural Outreach Program of the David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies at Brigham Young University as part of an effort to foster open cultural exchange within the educational community and to promote increased global understanding by providing meaningful cultural education tools.

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WHY STUDY CULTURES?

For most of us, cultures are misunderstood; they are nebulous, vague, and hidden. Like the famous iceberg analogy, we know that most of what a culture is cannot be seen. But what does that mean? And why, then, should we study cultures if we do not know what we're studying in the first place?

In the late twentieth century, Brigham Young University did not embrace a new discipline, but rather a new area of study—the study of cultures. Typically, anthropology is the social science that studies cultures. Why should they have all the fun? The study of cultures unites other academic disciplines (as needed), drawing upon literature, political science, sociology, and even the more applied areas of nursing, social work, law, and business. The study of cultures has grown into nothing short of a revolt against disciplines, “a mode of inquiry” that looks at things in new ways.¹

In 1982, the David M. Kennedy Center for International Studies established Intercultural Outreach² as a formal program to help build bridges of intercultural understanding. Since then, more than 10,000 gratis cultural presentations have been given to local area public schools, taking students to new places using language, multimedia, and imagination. *CultureGuides* derive from the same expertise that has been honed in classrooms—with the exciting exception that these intercultural learning tools are not geographically bound. Thanks to the Internet, accessible multimedia technology, and our trusty eMACs, a limitless audience can learn about different cultures.

Globalization, the driving paradigm of the post-Cold War world, means that now, more than ever, culture matters. Culture is the invisible context that may keep us from understanding important people, places, and ideas; it exists whether or not we think about it. Intercultural education can help us, not only as an intellectual exercise, but also in very practical ways to combat racism, to expand business, and to communicate effectively.

CultureGuides share the same aim as Edward T. Hall, the eminent cultural scholar, to try to “make culture real.”³ Even though our “student guides” are not present in every classroom, we hope that *CultureGuides* will make classrooms of the mind and cultural laboratories wherever you may reside.

¹ Ziauddin Sardar and Borin Van Loon. *Introducing Cultural Studies*, Totem Books, New York: 1998.

² The program was originally called International Outreach when it was established in 1982, but it was renamed Intercultural Outreach in 2006 to better reflect its aims.

³ *The Edge: The E-Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Summer 1998, Vol. 1(3) Posted 10/11/98, <http://interculturalrelations.com/v1i3Summer1998/sum98sorrellshall.htm>.

TRADITIONS

FAMILY AND WEDDINGS

Mexican culture strongly emphasizes family relationships, including a family hierarchy that defines the roles and responsibilities of each family member. In Mexico, the family is the fundamental component of society and the foundation of many traditions and celebrations. Of all the festivities in Mexican culture, weddings are the most elaborate; they commemorate the creation and continuation of the family.



Starting Points

1. Listen to a selection of traditional *mariachi* [mah-ree-ah-chee] music (**see Additional Resources**). Have you heard this type of music before? When? Mexicans love the liveliness of mariachi music. It is a popular choice at weddings and other celebrations. Seemingly simple things like music and dancing can bring families in Mexico together as they celebrate special occasions.
2. Brainstorm a list of components of a traditional wedding in the United States. Why do we perpetuate these traditions? How can weddings express a culture's perceptions of family and marriage? Weddings in Mexico are family affairs, bringing friends and loved ones together to celebrate the start of a new branch of the family.
3. Make a list of ideas and attitudes about families and weddings in the United States. As you learn about Mexican families and weddings, make another list of Mexican ideas and attitudes about weddings. Are there similarities or differences? The Mexican people celebrate big weddings with all of their family members because the family is such an important social construction in Mexico, and weddings are a reason for families to get together and enjoy each other's company.



Information

The Family

In Mexican culture, family hierarchy and traditions stress the importance of family as well as family values. Loyalty, dependability, and trustworthiness characterize the relationships of immediate and extended family members. In many ways, the family embodies Mexican culture and its inherent values of honor and respect. Although many aspects of society are changing rapidly in Mexico, the family is still considered a fundamental component of society and is the basis of many traditions.

Hierarchy within the Family

In Mexican culture, the family is organized into a patriarchy, meaning the oldest male is the main figure of authority. For example, if the oldest living male in the family is the grandfather, his voice is the final authority in matters that involve the entire family. In the grandfather's absence, the oldest son or grandson takes his place as patriarch, or head of the family.

The hierarchic structure continues down into the immediate family where the father is the head of the home. His role includes being a caretaker and provider in addition to making decisions concerning the family. The mother is second in authority to the father and is primarily responsible for taking care of the children and the household. In general, parents make most of the decisions for both the families as a whole and its individual members, and the children have little say concerning family government issues.

Children are taught respect for their elders from an early age; this principle is reinforced through constant interaction with relatives. In many cases, three generations live together—parents live with their children and grandchildren. After finishing high school, most children remain living at home until they marry (usually in their late twenties); even after they marry, many children move only a few houses away from their parents. Consequently, many Mexican neighborhoods are made up of grandparents, parents, children, aunts, uncles, and cousins from the same family all living within a few blocks of each other.

The physical proximity of extended family leads to frequent gatherings. It is common for families to meet together every Sunday for lunch or dinner. Responsibility for hosting these get-togethers rotates between the parents and the married children. Women typically prepare the meals, while the men relax and visit. These meals are often followed by music and games, after which the family spends hours talking and relaxing together.

On a larger scale, Mexicans are a very festive people and celebrate numerous holidays and events. Because close family ties are especially valued, nearly every holiday or event is based around the family. Examples include Independence Day, Christmas, Cinco de Mayo [sink-oh day my-oh], birthdays, and weddings. Because individual families perpetuate these traditions, the family has become an important component of Mexican society.

Approach to Marriage

In Mexico, the notion of dating can be very romanticized. The man is expected to court the woman and “win her over.” Because of the interactive and highly social nature of Mexican culture, many couples may know each other their whole lives before their courtship. Further, it is not unusual for childhood friends to eventually begin dating. Courtship often happens within a close community, and family members can be very involved in dating and marriage decisions.

Most Mexican couples are exclusive in their dating. It is rare for individuals to date many different people or to go on blind dates. In fact, going on multiple dates with different people during a short period of time is considered improper. The courtship and engagement interval of a relationship usually lasts one to three years. After the engagement is official, a couple devotes months or even years to planning, preparing, and saving money for the wedding day. At the time of engagement, an extended family member or close family friend is chosen to be the godfather. He sponsors the couple and watches over them morally and financially.

The Wedding

The wedding ceremony and celebration are carefully planned and quite elaborate. Various financial and organizational responsibilities associated with the planning of

the wedding are divided among members of the extended family. These financial contributions for wedding preparations often take the place of gifts for the couple.

Because state and religious weddings are not mutually recognized, couples often have a small, state-officiated ceremony (see **Traditions Visual 1**) followed by an elaborate church ceremony. For many, the church ceremony is considered the actual wedding and is therefore followed by a huge celebration. It is tradition for the family to rent a spacious reception hall for the festivities, which typically include a traditional Mexican dinner catered by members of the family and a program of music performed by a traditional mariachi band. The bride and groom dance the first official dance. The bride then dances with her father, while the groom invites his new mother-in-law to dance. Throughout the night, the family dances and plays a variety of wedding games (see **Traditions Visual 2**).

One popular wedding game is called “A La Víbora” [ah lah vee-bor-ah] (see **Traditions Visual 3**), or “To the Snake.” To play this game, the family forms two lines, one made up of all males and the other of all females. The bride and groom stand on two chairs and make a bridge with their arms while the rest of the family runs underneath them. As they pass under the bridge, the family chants a song with an increasing tempo and begins to run faster and faster until the music stops. The bride and groom then close the bridge on two people, one male and one female. This couple forms the new bridge with their arms and they repeat the game.

Another tradition is the dollar (peso) dance. Guests and family members take turns dancing with the bride and groom. Before they can dance, however, they must pin money to the bride or groom’s clothing (see **Traditions Visual 4**). The money is a gift to help the couple begin their new life together. These festivities usually last until early morning when the bride gives a few remarks and special thanks to the guests before everyone returns home.



Activities

1. Throw a mock wedding celebration. Assign each person a role (e.g., bride, groom, cousin, father, or mother). Remember to act according to your place in the family structure. Invite people who play the guitar, violin, or trumpet to form a mariachi band, or bring a recording of traditional Mexican music (see **Additional Resources**). Bring traditional Mexican dishes to share and play wedding games like “A La Víbora” (see **Traditions Visual 3**).
2. Using a list of ideas and attitudes you have about your own family, create a family crest. Color it with markers or crayons. Show your friends and discuss the different values you have and enjoy in each of your families.
3. Research five different wedding customs from Mexico or other Latin American cultures. Write a short paragraph explaining how you think the tradition reflects that culture’s view of the family.

4. Write an essay on the similarities and differences between weddings in Mexico and in the United States. Draw on your own experiences and suggest reasons why these differences may be a result of different attitudes toward family.
5. Design a bulletin board or collage. Use pictures, words, and objects to illustrate the integration of family relationships into routine daily life and traditional celebrations in Mexican culture. Complete the Mexican Traditions crossword puzzle (see **Traditions Visual 5**).



Discussion Questions

1. Is the family the central unit of society in the United States? Think of the emphasis American culture places on families. How does it differ from that of Mexican culture? In what ways is it similar?
2. How does patriarchal hierarchy affect Mexican families? Is this family hierarchy present in the United States? Why do you think it is or is not? If not, do you think it should be present in the United States? Why or why not?
3. In what specific ways do wedding celebrations reflect the personality and culture of the Mexican people? Are American weddings a reflection of the personality and culture of the American people? In what ways?
4. How can understanding Mexican perspectives and values of the family help a young adult from the United States understand a young adult from Mexico? Why is it important to discuss different perspectives?
5. Besides marriage and family, what other institutions (political, business, etc.) might be affected by traditional Mexican family structures? How?
6. Would you want to live in the same neighborhood with your grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and married siblings? Explain your reasons. What do you think is the biggest advantage to living close to family? What might be some disadvantages?

FOLKLORE & LANGUAGE

THE VIRGIN OF GUADALUPE

Worshipping Mary, the mother of Christ, is an important and sacred part of the belief system of Mexican Catholics. Also known as the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mary has become Mexico's patron saint because of her position as a compassionate advocate with God for the people of Mexico. For many, the Virgin of Guadalupe represents the character of Mexico: the fusion of Spain's Catholicism and Mexico's indigenous religions.



Starting Points

1. Have you ever heard of someone seeing a vision? How did it affect that person's life? Whether or not you believe in that kind of experience, it is important to understand the powerful effect it can have on a person. Furthermore, when such an experience is of a religious nature, it can have a profound impact not only on the person who has the vision but also on the people who hear about it. Hundreds of years ago, the visions one man had while walking near an ancient temple site changed and united the lives of both the indigenous and European peoples living in Mexico.
2. What kind of role does religion play in your society? Religion plays a major role in the society of Mexico and other Latin American countries. In Mexico, religion permeates every aspect of people's lives and therefore becomes a cultural as well as a personal element of daily life.
3. As you learn about the Virgin of Guadalupe, understand that this story is an integral part of the lives of many Mexicans. Think about why she has become such an important symbol in Mexican culture. Are there stories in your own culture that have similar effects on you? Some feel that if the Virgin had not appeared and united the people, Mexico would not be what it is today—culturally, politically, or religiously.



Information

Mexican Catholicism and the Virgin Mary

Roman Catholicism is the dominant religion in Mexico. However, there are differences between the Catholic Church in Mexico and the church headquartered at the Vatican. For example, Mexican Catholics place great emphasis on worshipping the Virgin Mary as one of their saints. She is considered the "Mother of Mexico," or the Virgin of Guadalupe (see **Folklore & Language Visual 1**). This has caused some divisions worldwide between members of the Catholic faith, since some believe worship and prayer to the Virgin take the place of worshipping the Holy Trinity and expressing faith in more traditional ways.

The story of Mary's first appearance, a vision given to a poor Mexican farmer, helps explain the importance to Mexican Catholicism of worshipping the Virgin Mary. The story has become a symbol of her love and compassion for the Mexican people. It is symbolic of the synthesis of European and indigenous beliefs as well as an affirmation of a unique Mexican identity.

The Story of Juan Diego

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 Tonantzin [tone-ant-seen] once stood. Suddenly, the farmer saw a vision of a beautiful woman with indigenous and Spanish features: it was the Virgin Mary! She directed him to go to Mexico City and tell ecclesiastical officials to build a church in her name. Juan Diego followed her instructions, but the church officials did not believe that the Virgin Mary appeared to the lowly farmer. They asked for proof that the miracle had actually happened.

Juan Diego returned to the hillside, and when the Virgin appeared again, he asked her for a sign. Beautiful red roses miraculously bloomed before Juan Diego's eyes, even though roses do not naturally bloom in central Mexico during December. He gathered the flowers 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 profound respect and amazement. There, imprinted on the blanket of Juan Diego, was the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, exactly as Juan Diego had seen her (see **Folklore & Language Visual 2**). It is said that the image was so perfect in detail that one could see the reflection of Juan Diego in the eyes of the Virgin. Because the Virgin of Guadalupe was seen by an Aztec and her features were *mestizo* [meh-stee-soh], or mixed race, she symbolizes the union of indigenous and Catholic beliefs.

The Virgin of Guadalupe and Modern Mexico

Today, thousands of devout Catholics make pilgrimages to the enormous Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe, located in Mexico City (see **Folklore & Language Visuals 3 and 4**). There visitors can view Juan Diego's tilma, encased in glass, on which the image of the Virgin is imprinted. Many also worship at a small shrine on the hillside where Juan Diego saw the vision.

Rich and poor alike honor the Virgin of Guadalupe. Her image can be seen in small household shrines, parochial schools, businesses, markets, buses, taxis, churches, and cathedrals (see **Folklore & Language Visual 5**). The day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, 12 December, is an official national holiday observed with pilgrimages, processions, special religious masses, and fiestas throughout the country. During the celebration, the traditions and values of indigenous Mexico are incorporated into the celebration of the honored Catholic saint.

Since the original appearance of the Virgin Mary to the humble Juan Diego, many others have claimed to have seen her as well. Sightings are common in both urban and rural communities. Mexicans see her as their loving and personal advocate with God. She is said to watch over Mexico, providing comfort, protection, and healing. Allusions to her appearance can be found in art, film, literature, and even architecture. For many, she is the most revered figure in all of Mexico.



Activities

1. Design a mural depicting religion in Mexican society. You may want to do additional research on Catholicism in Mexico, the Virgin of Guadalupe, Aztec beliefs, and Mexican art.
2. Using paper, glue, scissors, cloth, paint, and any other craft materials you might need, design a new coin, stamp, or flag for Mexico that illustrates the importance of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexican culture.
3. What would it be like if you had been Juan Diego? Write the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe as if it were an entry in your journal. Be sure to include details of the event as well as your thoughts and feelings about the experience.
4. Write a paper on how you think the Virgin of Guadalupe has affected women and the roles they play in Mexican society. If needed, conduct interviews or look at folklore and literature to help you draw conclusions.
5. Write your own version of a Mexican religious experience, folktale, or legend. Try to look at Mexican culture in your local community for ideas. You may try interviewing people or attending a local celebration. Include a short paragraph or essay explaining the effect of this story on those who tell it.



Discussion Questions

1. What are some legends or folktales that are told in the United States? How do these types of stories affect the people who hear them, and what purpose do they serve in society?
2. In what other ways do you think the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe has affected the culture of Mexico? Do you think by telling the story to people from other cultures that it will affect them? How?
3. Do you agree with those that believe the Virgin of Guadalupe has replaced the traditional ways of worship (e.g., going to church)? If so, do you think it is a problem? What is your opinion in the controversy? Why?
4. What is the purpose of visions for religious people? How does the power of visions impact the society that believes in them?
5. How do you think the story of Juan Diego has affected the merging of indigenous and European elements in Mexican culture?
6. Do you celebrate anything similar to the day of the Virgin of Guadalupe? What is it? Why is that holiday important to you?

FOOD

THE FLAVOR OF MEXICO

Mexicans take pride in the freshness and diversity of their food. Mexican food is known for its vivid color and strong, spicy flavor. These qualities reflect the liveliness and diversity of Mexican culture (see **Food Visual 1**).



Starting Points

1. What food do you usually associate with tortilla chips? Salsa, of course! The best and most authentic salsa is homemade. In Mexican cuisine, salsa is extremely common, not only because it uses so many local ingredients like *chile* [chee-lay] pepper, but also because it complements most of the popular Mexican dishes.
2. What is your favorite dessert? Why? What do you think it says about your personality? What do you think it says about your culture? Often, looking at what people eat can help illustrate many things about their personality and culture. How might Mexican food influence Mexican culture and personality? Mexican dishes are always cooked fresh, meaning that preparing a meal with fresh ingredients is a daily priority for people in Mexico.
3. Taste three different kinds of salsa. Although all types of salsa have common ingredients, there are numerous possible ways to make it. Salsa is served with most Mexican foods; different kinds of salsas add different flavors to various dishes, depending on the complexity of the salsa.



Information

Food and Culture in Mexico

Mexican food comes in all varieties—it ranges from seafood to desert lizard. Although known for its color and its flavor, Mexican food is also famous for its mouth-burning spice. Many Mexican dishes use beans, rice, or tortillas. Vegetables and peppers are also a part of the meal as well as beef or chicken. The variety of flavor comes with the variety of combinations of these and other foods (see **Food Visual 2**).

Rarely, if ever, would a prepackaged or microwavable meal be served in a Mexican household. In fact, people in Mexico go to the local market daily to buy fresh ingredients with which to cook their meals. Mexicans also take great pride in their culinary skills; many Mexican women dedicate hours of their day to the preparation of the evening or afternoon meal (see **Food Visual 3**). Many of the dishes include hot peppers as a primary ingredient, and if a dish does not include fiery spices, it is likely to be served with a spicy salsa as a topping or garnish.

Staple Foods and the Pepper

Mexicans pride themselves on the freshness and diversity of the foods they offer. Some staple foods in Mexico include rice, beans, tortillas, beef, and chicken

(see **Food Visual 4**). These foods can be served in many different ways, and their flavors vary depending on the cook.

A distinct flavor in the majority of Mexican dishes is the spicy taste of pepper, or chile, which is a time-honored ingredient in almost all meals (see **Food Visual 1**). The pepper is a hot, aromatic plant that is used fresh, cooked, or dried. These peppers were even used hundreds of years ago by the indigenous people who first inhabited the Mexican territory. The chile is relatively easy to grow and adds seasoning to a dish. It has become a favorite seasoning for all types of Mexican dishes. Its hot, stinging sensation comes from the oil in the pepper's seeds. Peppers are used throughout all of Mexico, but their variety and accessibility vary according to region. The southern Mexican states enjoy hot, spicy peppers in great quantities, while the northern states prefer a more mild pepper.

Salsa

The most common way to use the pepper is in salsa. There are many different types of salsa; each is made to accompany certain foods and traditional dishes. Some salsas are made to go with specific foods and include a variety of ingredients with complex preparation; other simpler salsas are made with fewer ingredients and accompany all kinds of meals and snacks. The most common salsa is made with three elements—tomato, pepper, and garlic. Additional varieties of peppers, onions, or lime juice may be added as desired. A stone bowl called a *molcajete* [mole-kah-hey-tey] is used to grind the ingredients together, but a blender or food processor can be used as a substitute if a molcajete is not available.

Recipe for Salsa

Ingredients:

4–6 serrano peppers
4–6 roma tomatoes

2 garlic cloves
pinch of salt

Preparation

Note: You may want to use rubber gloves when handling the peppers to keep the spicy oil from burning your hands or eyes. Do not touch your eyes after touching the peppers!

1. Set oven to broil.
2. Place peppers in cake pan and toast in oven for five minutes. Remove pan from oven and turn peppers with a fork. Repeat this process until skins are slightly black. Remove from oven and peel off pepper skins. Set peppers aside.
3. Repeat step two for tomatoes, adjusting toasting time to two minutes. Set tomatoes aside.
4. In molcajete or blender, crush garlic. If using a blender, all ingredients can be put in at the same time.
5. Add peppers and blend them with the garlic.
6. Add tomatoes and blend all ingredients together until mixed into a pulp.

Yield: 4–6 servings

Flautas

A second traditional Mexican dish, which has become popular throughout the United States, is the *flauta* [fla-oo-tah]. The word flauta means “flute” in Spanish, so it is no surprise that these taco-like delicacies are long and round like the instrument for which they are named. Flautas are made with corn tortillas filled with chicken or beef, then rolled and deep-fried. They are commonly topped with *guacamole* [wah-kah-mole-lay].

Recipe for Flautas

Ingredients:

4 avocados	corn tortillas
2–3 tomatoes, diced	vegetable oil (to coat frying pan)
½ onion, diced	1 head lettuce
cilantro, finely chopped	sour cream and sliced tomatoes
1 whole chicken	(if desired)
4–5 potatoes	

Preparation

1. Mash avocados until pasty.
2. Add diced tomatoes and onions.
3. Mix avocado, tomatoes, onions, and pinch of cilantro. Set this guacamole mixture aside.
4. Boil chicken for 30 minutes.
5. Skin and debone chicken. Cut chicken into bite-sized pieces. Set aside.
6. Boil potatoes at least 20 minutes. Peel and cut into bite-sized pieces.
7. Place pieces of chicken and potatoes in the center of each tortilla. Roll tortilla around chicken and potatoes and secure the tortilla with a toothpick through the center.
8. Over medium heat, fry rolled tortillas in warm frying pan until crispy. Drain grease.
9. Place cooked flautas on a plate and cover with shredded lettuce and guacamole.
10. Garnish with sour cream and sliced tomatoes, and top with salsa.

Yield: 4–6 servings



Activities

1. Select a traditional recipe and prepare it. Write a journal entry or an essay on how making this food was different from your normal cooking. Complete the Flavor of Mexico word search (**see Food Visual 5**) while you are cooking or after you have written about your experience.
2. Go to a local, authentic Mexican restaurant. Try to find one that is family-owned and talk to the owners and employees. What can you learn about food and culture? How do we use food to express cultural identity? Afterward, write a short summary of your experience and your response to it.
3. Collect as many authentic Mexican recipes as you can. Compile a cookbook and design the cover to reflect what you have learned about the culture.

4. Compare some of your favorite recipes to the salsa and flauta recipes. Are any ingredients the same? Which are different? Are there any ingredients you would like to add or change? Try it.
5. Research the history and evolution of your favorite Mexican food. You may want to concentrate on a single dish or on foods from a particular region. In an essay, recount the information and as many recipe variations as you can find. Remember to consult books and periodicals as well as the Internet.



Discussion Questions

1. Why do people eat different kinds of food? Besides cultural preferences, what other elements influence how and what people eat?
2. Why is salsa a good example of food that relates to Mexican culture?
3. What are some differences between Mexican food and American food? What are some similarities? Why do you think these similarities and differences exist?
4. Are there differences between “authentic” and “Americanized” Mexican food? How do these differences reflect the interaction, change, and blending of the two cultures? What makes Mexican food authentic? What makes it Americanized? What conclusions can you draw about the two cultures by contrasting these types of food?
5. Can you think of a food in the United States or in your area that is used as a staple in several recipes? How would those recipes change if you didn’t have that food in the United States or if you couldn’t get it in your area?
6. If you were writing to a pen pal in Mexico who wanted to know about American food, what would you tell him or her? Do you think we have any food that is purely American, or is the food we eat completely influenced by other cultures? Explain your answer.

CROSS-CULTURAL CONTRIBUTIONS

ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS

Despite the stereotypical view that Mexico is and always has been a rural and underdeveloped nation, historically it was one of the world's great empires. Mexico's ancient civilizations rivaled the Roman Empire in size. Today, Mexicans are proud of their indigenous history and their cultural identity.



Starting Points

1. Make a list of what you see as the five most powerful or influential civilizations of all time. Are there any ancient civilizations of Mexico on your list? Many people do not necessarily think of Mexico as the home of great empires, but the ancient Olmec [ohl-mek] empire, the city of Teotihuacán [teh-oh-tee-wah-cahn], and the Aztec empire that occupied the area prior to the European conquest rivaled ancient Greece and Rome in their size, power, and continuing influence on modern life.
2. Have you heard the legend of Tenochtitlán [ten-oh-ch-tee-tlan]? It has been told for over two thousand years. How do you think most legends are passed down? How will legends be passed down in the future? As you hear the legend of Tenochtitlán, write down reasons why you think this legend has influenced so many lives over the years.
3. What do you know about Mexican culture? Are you familiar with their fiestas or with their religious practices? What factors do you think contribute to the many aspects of the culture? The blending of indigenous and Spanish cultures has helped produce a unique cultural identity.



Information

Ancient Empires

Throughout the course of history, many civilizations have inhabited the region that is present-day Mexico (see **Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 1**). The three most prominent civilizations were the Olmecs, the mysterious settlers of Teotihuacán, and the Aztecs. The Olmec civilization began around 2000 B.C.E. The city of Teotihuacán was founded around 200 B.C.E. Mexico's last great pre-Columbian civilization, the Aztec empire, began with the construction of the city of Tenochtitlán in 1325 C.E. over Lake Texcoco [teks-koh-koh].

The Olmecs were the first of Mexico's ancient civilizations. They are noted for their colossal stone sculptures and complex calendar system, which was later used by the Mayans and the Aztecs (see **Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 2**). The Olmecs, who originated in what we now call the state of Veracruz [Vair-ah-croose], flourished between 1200 and 400 B.C.E.

The Olmecs constructed ceremonial cities with pyramids and temples built from mud and stone. The precision and exactness with which the pyramids were constructed is amazing, considering the lack of modern tools used to construct them—ancient Mexicans did not even use the wheel. The pyramids in Mexico were symbolic and sometimes used as burial places for important leaders.

The Olmecs were artistic pioneers as well. They produced jade statues and were probably the first muralists and cave painters in Mexico. Typical Olmec art features warriors and jaguars. The Olmecs believed themselves to be descendants of the jaguar and held the animal in high religious esteem.

The site of the ancient city Teotihuacán, about twenty-five miles northeast of present-day Mexico City, is home to the ruins of the largest pre-Columbian city in the Western Hemisphere (see **Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 3**). The origin of the ancient inhabitants of Teotihuacán is unknown. However, the great civilization of Teotihuacán is believed to have started around 200 B.C.E. It developed into an important city in the first century C.E. and flourished until about 650 C.E. At its peak, it covered about eight square miles and had a population of as many as two hundred thousand people. Its noteworthy monuments include the Pyramid of the Sun, one of the largest structures ever built by Native Americans; the Pyramid of the Moon; and the Avenue of the Dead, a broad thoroughfare flanked by the ruins of temples (see **Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 4 and 5**). The people of Teotihuacán had close contact with the Mayan culture of Guatemala and Yucatán, and their civilization had an important influence on later Mexican peoples such as the Aztecs.

According to their legends, the Aztecs originated from a place called Aztlán [ahst-lahn], somewhere in northern or northwestern Mexico. At that time, the Aztecs (who referred to themselves as the Mexica [meh-hee-cah] or Tenochca [ten-oh-ch-cah]) were a nomadic tribe living in the margins of civilized Mesoamerica. This tribe spoke Nahuatl [nah-wah-tahl], a language that some people in Mexico still speak today.

Some time in the twelfth century, the Aztecs embarked on a period of migration and settled in the central basin of Mexico in 1325 C.E. The story of this Aztec settlement is known as the Legend of Tenochtitlán. The word “aztec” today is used as a collective term and applies to all the peoples linked to these original Aztec founders by trade, custom, religion, and language.

Fearless warriors and pragmatic builders, the Aztecs created an empire during the fifteenth century that was surpassed in the Americas only by that of the Incas in Peru. Early texts and modern archaeology reveal that the Aztecs contributed many positive achievements in addition to their conquests and religious practices. The Aztecs’ simple lifestyle and seemingly limited understanding of advanced scientific and mathematical concepts make their civilization even more remarkable.

The Legend of Tenochtitlán

Legend says that the traditions and customs of the Aztecs were different from other tribes, and they longed to live in a land that they could call their own. The chief god of the Aztecs was named Huitzilopochtli [weet-see-loh-poch-tee]. One day Huitzilopochtli revealed to the tribe a place where they could live in peace. He

showed the Aztecs a large lake with an island in the middle where a prickly pear cactus grew. An eagle was perched on top of the cactus with a live snake in its mouth (see **Flag of Mexico**). Huitzilopchtli told the Aztecs that this island was the place in which they could live in peace.

After many years of wandering, the Aztecs found the place that their god had shown them in the vision: a small swampy island in Lake Texcoco. There the Aztecs built the great city of Tenochtitlán, meaning “The Place of the Prickly Pear Cactus.”

Tenochtitlán was the capital city of the great Aztec empire for hundreds of years until Hernán Cortéz and the Spaniards conquered it during the sixteenth century. Today the city is known as Mexico City. It is the capital of Mexico and one of the largest cities in the world (see **Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 6**). The Mexican flag displays the symbol of the ancient Aztec legend of the founding of Tenochtitlán. It bears the emblem of the eagle with a snake in its beak perched on top of the prickly pear cactus.



Activities

1. Most of what we know about the ancient civilizations of Mexico comes from archaeological discoveries. Create your own ancient Mexican artifacts, such as a plaster tablet or a small pyramid made from paper or blocks. Swap artifacts and try to decipher cultural information from them. If time and materials permit, break and bury the artifacts and have the other groups excavate the “ruin.” Then analyze their discoveries.
2. Research and write about how ancient indigenous cultures have influenced aspects of modern Mexico such as government, religion, or art. Draw conclusions and support them with concrete examples.
3. Watch a video on the ancient civilizations of Mexico (see **Additional Resources**).
4. Write about a significant contribution from an ancient civilization that benefits you today. Then write about what contributions your society is making that will benefit future generations. Present and discuss your ideas in a small group and create a visual display to share with others.
5. Build a paper maché pyramid like the ancient pyramids of Mexico. Decorate it with paint to look like those made by the Aztecs, the Olmecs, or the people of Teotihuacán.



Discussion Questions

1. How do you think some of the ancient Mesoamerican empires have influenced modern Mexican culture?
2. To what do you attribute the success of the construction of the pyramids?
3. How does learning about ancient civilizations in Mexico affect our perception of Mexico today?
4. How do you think archaeological discoveries have affected Mexicans’ perceptions of themselves and their culture?

5. What are specific characteristics of each ancient civilization discussed in this section that are unique to their society? Are there any similar characteristics?
6. What factors do you think make a society great? Do you think technology is a beneficial or constraining factor when building an empire? Explain your answers.

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: Volcán 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 (July 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 est.)

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 est.) manufactured goods, oil and oil products, coffee, silver, fruits, vegetables, cotton

Imports: \$253.1 billion f.o.b. (2006 est.) 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, Spain

Currency: Mexican peso (MXN)

Exchange Rate: 11.024 MXN = \$1 U.S. (2006)

HISTORY AND HOLIDAYS

TIME LINE

- 900 B.C.E.** Rise of the Olmecs
- 600** Founding of Monte Albán on a mountain overlooking three valleys
- 200** Rise of Teotihuacán, one of the Western Hemisphere's largest ancient cities, with up to 50,000 inhabitants
- 200 C.E.** Construction of the Sun and Moon pyramids at Teotihuacán
- 700** Fall of Teotihuacán
- 1100** The Cholula pyramid reaches its maximum size as the largest known pyramid in the world
- 1325** Aztecs found the city of Tenochtitlán
- 1519** Hernán Cortés arrives in the New World
- 1521** The Aztec Empire defeated by the armies of Cortés
- 1810** Miguel Hidalgo begins independence movement
- 1821** Mexico wins independence from Spain
- 1836** Texas gains independence from Mexico
- 1846–48** The Mexican–American War
- 1853** Gadsden Purchase—the United States purchases land from Mexico that is now southern Arizona and New Mexico
- 1862** Battle of Puebla (Mexican victory)
- 1876** Porfirio Díaz revolts against the government and becomes dictator of Mexico
- 1910** Díaz is overthrown; period of violence and social revolution begins
- 1913** Victoriano Huerta seizes Mexico City
- 1914** Venustiano Carranza revolts against Huerta; Emiliano Zapata leads a revolt against Carranza; Francisco (Pancho) Villa also leads revolts
- 1917** Mexican revolution ends; new constitution written; Carranza elected president of Mexico
- 1920** Carranza is killed in a revolt led by General Alvaro Obregón, who is elected Carranza's successor
- 1929** Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) is formed and becomes Mexico's single political party
- 1942** Mexico enters WWII siding with the Allies
- 1945** Mexico becomes a member of the United Nations
- 1953** Women in Mexico receive the right to vote
- 1968** The Summer Olympics are held in Mexico City
- 1985** Earthquake in Mexico City kills thousands
- 1992** Mexico, Canada, and the United States sign the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)

- 1994** Chipas rebellion for government recognition of indigenous peoples staged by the Zapatista National Liberation Army
- 2000** Vicente Fox becomes the first Mexican president that is not from the PRI party
- 2005** Hurricane Emily; Popocatepetl [pop-e-kah-teh-peh-tul] volcano erupts—ash spews two miles high in the air

HOLIDAYS

- 1 Jan** Año Nuevo [ahn-yo nweh-voh] (New Year's Day)
- 6 Jan** Día de los Santos Reyes [dee-yah day lohs sahn-tohs ray-ez] (Day of the Three Kings)
- 24 Feb** Flag Day
- 5–10 Mar** Carnaval
- 21 Mar** The Birthday of Benito Juárez [ben-ee-toh wahr-ehz] (Mexican national hero)
- Spring** Semana Santa [seh-ma-na sahn-tah] (week of Good Friday and Easter)
- 1 May** Primero de Mayo [pree-mair-oh day my-oh](similar to U.S. Labor Day)
- 5 May** Cinco de Mayo [sink-oh day my-oh](honors the Mexican defeat of the French in 1862)
- 10 May** Mother's Day
- 16 Sep** Mexican Independence Day
- 12 Oct** Día de la Raza [dee-yah day lah rah-zah] (Day of the People)
- 1–2 Nov** Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead)
- 12 Dec** Día de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe [dee-yah nwest-rah seen-your-ah day gwad-ah-loop-ay] (the Virgin of Guadalupe)
- 16 Dec** Las Posadas [lahs poe-sah-dahs] (celebrates Joseph and Mary's search for shelter in Bethlehem)
- 25 Dec** La Navidad [lah na-vee-dahd] (Christmas)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

MEXICAN EMBASSY TO THE UNITED STATES

1911 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20006
Phone: (202) 728-1600
E-mail: mexembusa@sre.gob.mx
Web site: <http://www.embassyofmexico.org>

MEXICO DEPARTMENT OF TOURISM

New York

21 East 63rd Street, 3rd Floor
New York, NY 10021
Phone: (212) 821-0314, Fax: (212) 821-0367
E-mail: milmgto@interport.net
Web site: <http://www.mexico-travel.com>

Mexico City

Av. Presidente Masaryk No. 172
Col. Chapultepec Morales, C.P. 11587, México, Distrito Federal
RFC: STU750101-H22
Web site: <http://www.sectorturismo.gob.mx>

For additional offices throughout the U.S. and Mexico, call 1-800-44-MEXICO or visit <http://www.mexonline.com/travel.htm>

MEXICAN CULTURAL INSTITUTE

2829 16th Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20009
Phone: (202) 728.1628, Fax: (202) 462-7241

For additional locations throughout the U.S., consult the embassy web site listed above.

BOOKS

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FILM

Mexico's Great Pyramids, A & E Entertainment, 1998.

Mexico—Story Of Courage & Conquest, A & E Entertainment, 1999.

Mexico Central, International Video Corp, 1999.

Mexico Yucatan, International Video Corp, 1999.

101 Classic Goals of the World Cup, FIFA official videos.

INTERNET SITES

Alegría—the Mexican Folklore Home Page:

<http://www.alegria.org>

CIA World Factbook:

<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook>

Culture and Society of México:

<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~rjsalvad/scmfaq/scmfaq.html>

El Mariachi:

<http://www.elmariachi.com>

GourmetSleuth (recipes and more)

<http://gourmetsleuth.com>

Lords of the Earth—Maya/Aztec/Inca:

<http://www.mayaLords.org>

Mexico—A Country Study:

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/mxtoc.html>

Mexico at a Glance:

<http://www.usembassy-mexico.gov/eataglance1.htm>

Mexico Channel:

<http://mexicochannel.net>

Mexico Connect:

<http://www.mexconnect.com>

Mexico For Kids (in Spanish):

<http://www.elbalero.gob.mx/explora/html/home.html>

Mexico Online (web site list):

<http://www.mexonline.com/websites.htm>

Mexico Weekly Report:

<http://www.mexicoweekly.com>

Recipes from Mexico:

<http://www.recipehound.com>

Rockin' Robin's Cooking Mexican Recipes:

<http://cooking-mexican-recipes.com>

World Soccer Page:

<http://www.wpsoccer.com>

MUSIC

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All the Best Mariachi: 20 Great Favorites, Madacy Records, 1991.

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Traditions Visual 1: Signing Documents at the State Marriage Ceremony



Traditions Visual 2: Dancing after the Wedding



A LA VÍBORA

A la ví - bo - ra ví - bo - ra de la mar de la mar
 por a - qui pue - de pasar La de ade - lan - te co - rre
 mu - cho La de a - tras se que - dar - á Trás trás trás trás
 Un - a me - xi - can - na Que fru - ta ven - di - a
 Ma - na - ni - ta de or - o Dé - ja - me pa - sar
 cir - ùe - las cha - ba - ca - nos melón y san - dí - a. Trás trás trás trás
 Con - to - dos mis hi - jos Menos él de a - trás

Translation:

*A la víbora, víbora
 De la mar, de la mar
 Por aquí puede pasar.
 La de adelante corre mucho*

*La de atrás se quedará . . .
 Trás, trás, trás, trás.*

*Una mexicana
 Que fruta vendía
 Ciruelas, chabacanos,
 Melón y sandía . . .
 Trás, trás, trás, trás.*

*Mañanita de oro
 Déjame pasar
 Con todos mis hijos
 Menos él de atrás . . .
 Trás, trás, trás, trás.*

*To the serpent, the serpent
 Of the sea, of the sea
 Here it can pass by.
 The one in front runs fast,*

*The one in back will remain . . .
 Behind, behind, behind, behind.*

*A Mexican girl
 Who was selling fruit
 Plums, apricots,
 Melon and watermelon . . .
 Behind, behind, behind, behind.*

*Little golden morning,
 Let me pass
 With all my children
 Except for the one behind . . .
 Behind, behind, behind, behind.*

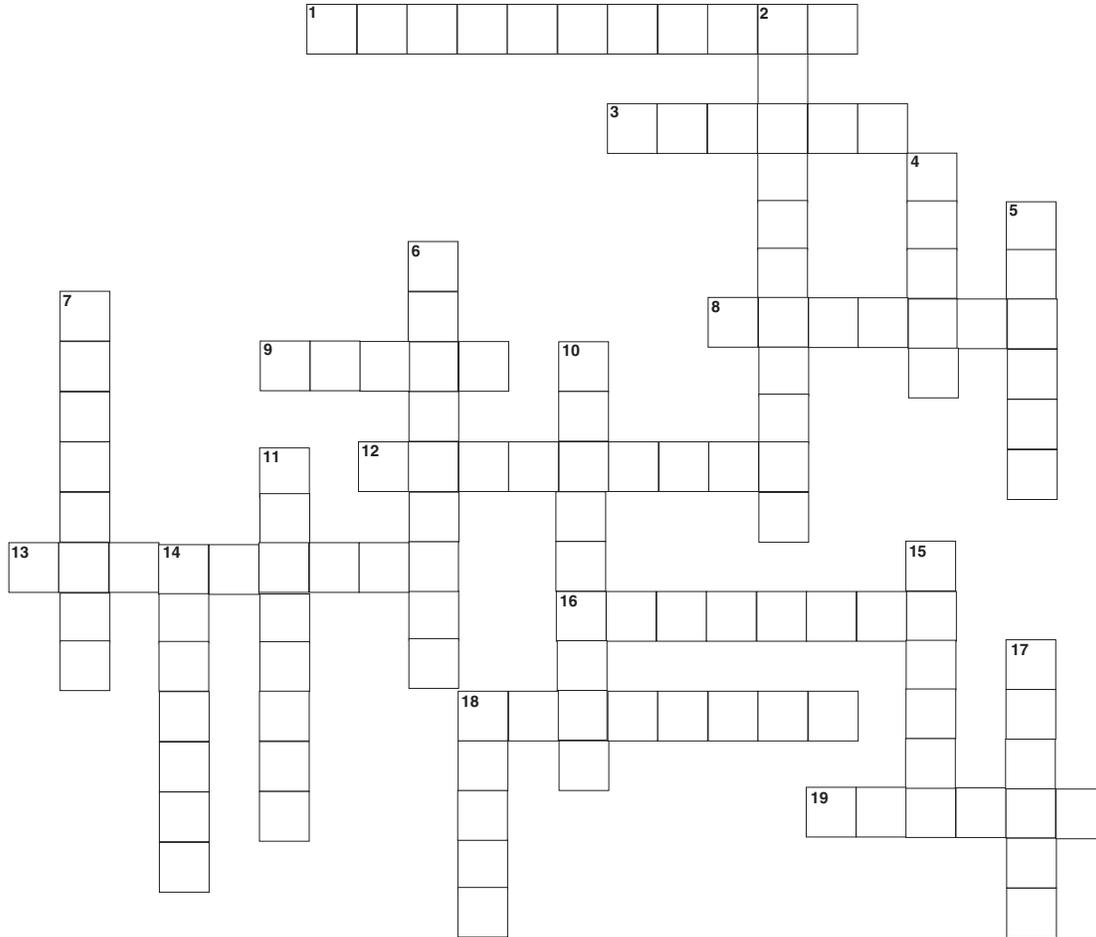
Traditions Visual 4: Traditional Dollar (Peso) Dance



Traditions Visual 5: Mexican Traditions Crossword Puzzle (1 of 2)

Name: _____

Mexican Traditions



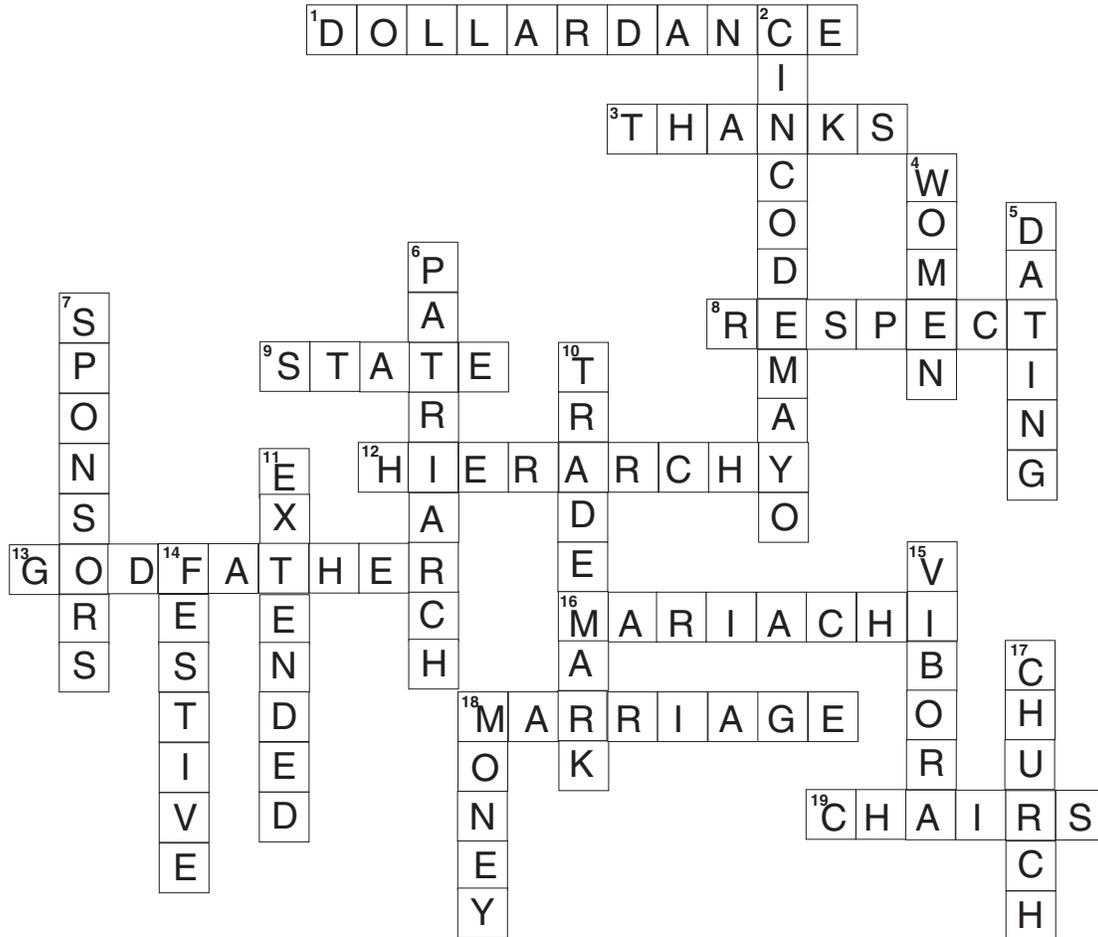
DOWN

- 2 This holiday is celebrated during the month of May.
- 4 Who typically prepares meals for family get-togethers?
- 5 This social activity in Mexico has become romanticized.
- 6 Head of the family in Mexico.
- 7 The godfather _____ the couples and watches over them.
- 10 The family is an important _____ of Mexican society.
- 11 _____ family live close to each other, often in the same neighborhood.
- 14 Mexicans are a very _____ people; they celebrate many holidays and events.
- 15 "A la _____" is a popular game at weddings in Mexico.
- 17 The _____ ceremony is often elaborate.
- 18 This gift helps a Mexican couple begin their new life together.

ACROSS

- 1 Another tradition at a Mexican wedding.
- 3 The bride _____ guests before everyone returns home.
- 8 Mexican children are taught to _____ their elders from a young age.
- 9 Mexico requires a _____ wedding in addition to any religious ceremony the couple may have because religious weddings are not legally recognized in Mexico.
- 12 The organization of a Mexican family.
- 13 When a Mexican couple becomes engaged, a family member or close friend is chosen to be their _____.
- 16 Traditional Mexican music played at family and social gatherings.
- 18 Family members are often involved in a decision about _____.
- 19 The bride and groom stand on two _____ during one wedding game.

Mexican Traditions



DOWN

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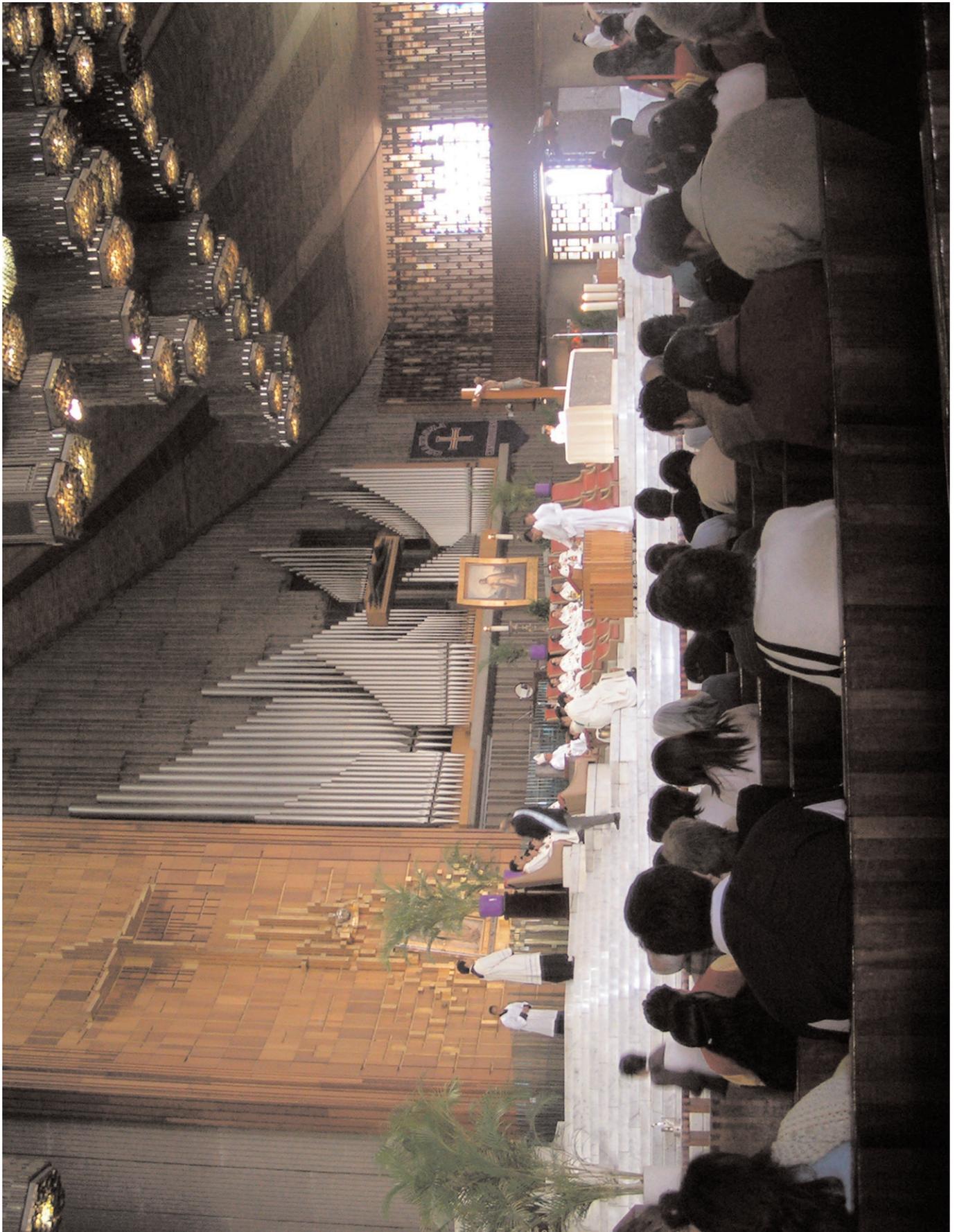
Folklore & Language Visual 1: The Virgin of Guadalupe







Folklore & Language Visual 4: Inside the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe during Mass



Folklore & Language Visual 5: Outdoor Shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe



Food Visual 1: Various Chile Peppers Used in Mexican Food



Food Visual 2: Variety of Mexican Food



Food Visual 3: Woman Preparing Tortillas as Part of a Mexican Dinner



Food Visual 4: Rice, Refried Beans, Chicken Taco, Chile Relleno, and Beef Enchilada Smothered in Cheese

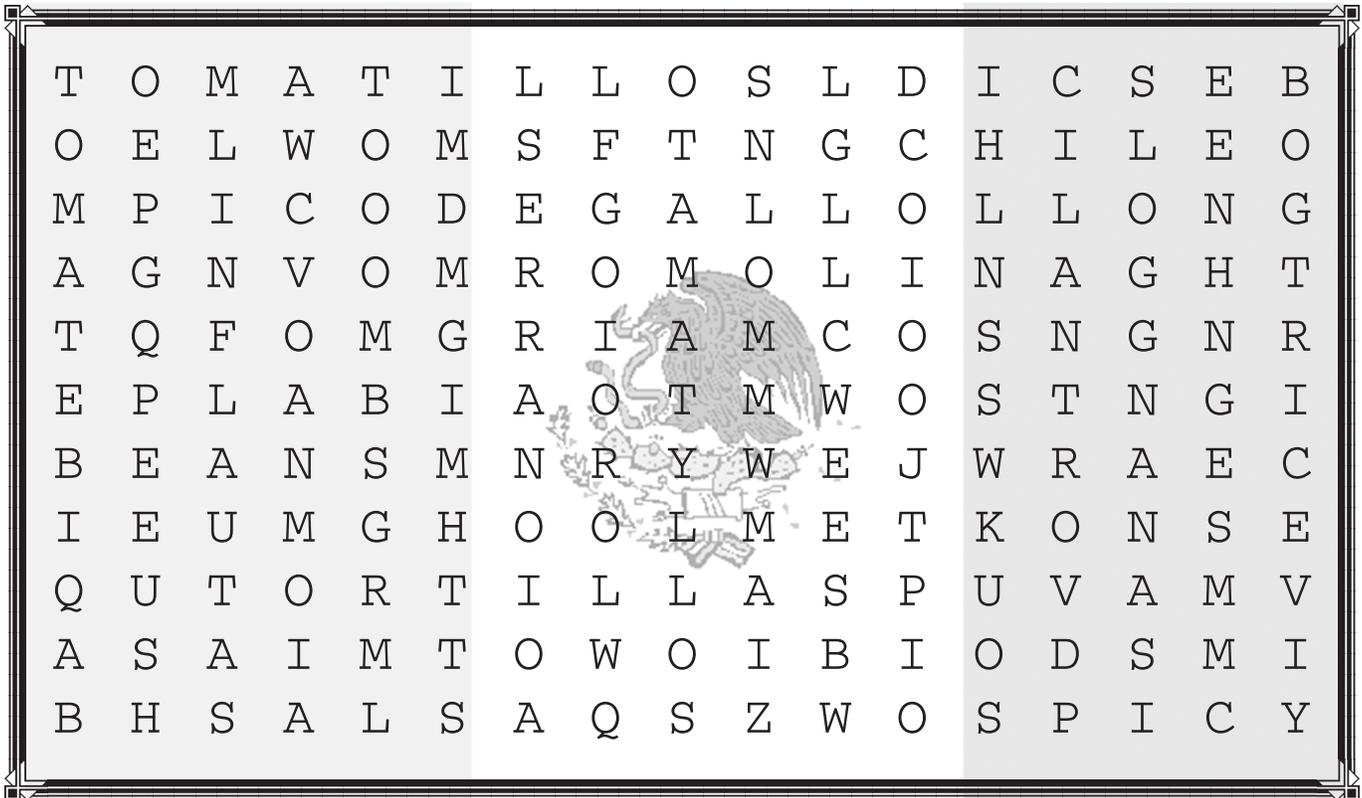


Food Visual 5: Flavor of Mexico Word Search (1 of 2)

Name: _____

FLAVOR OF MEXICO

FIND THE WORDS LISTED BELOW IN THE WORD SEARCH. WORDS MAY BE VERTICAL OR HORIZONTAL.

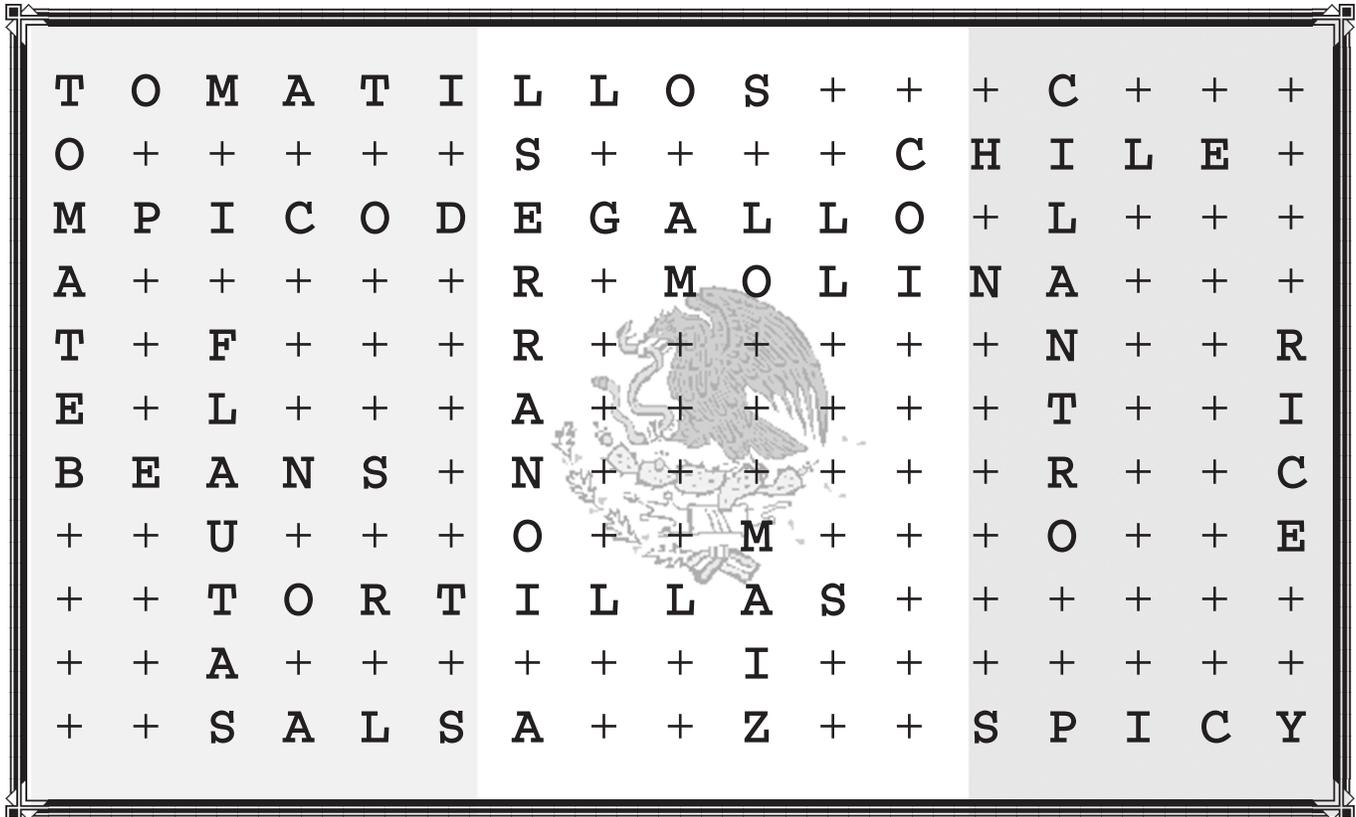


- | | |
|---------------|------------|
| BEANS | RICE |
| CHILE | SALSA |
| CILANTRO | SERRANO |
| FLAUTAS | SPICY |
| MAIZ | TOMATILLOS |
| MOLINA | TOMATE |
| PICO DE GALLO | TORTILLAS |

Name: _____

FLAVOR OF MEXICO

FIND THE WORDS LISTED BELOW IN THE WORD SEARCH. WORDS MAY BE VERTICAL OR HORIZONTAL.

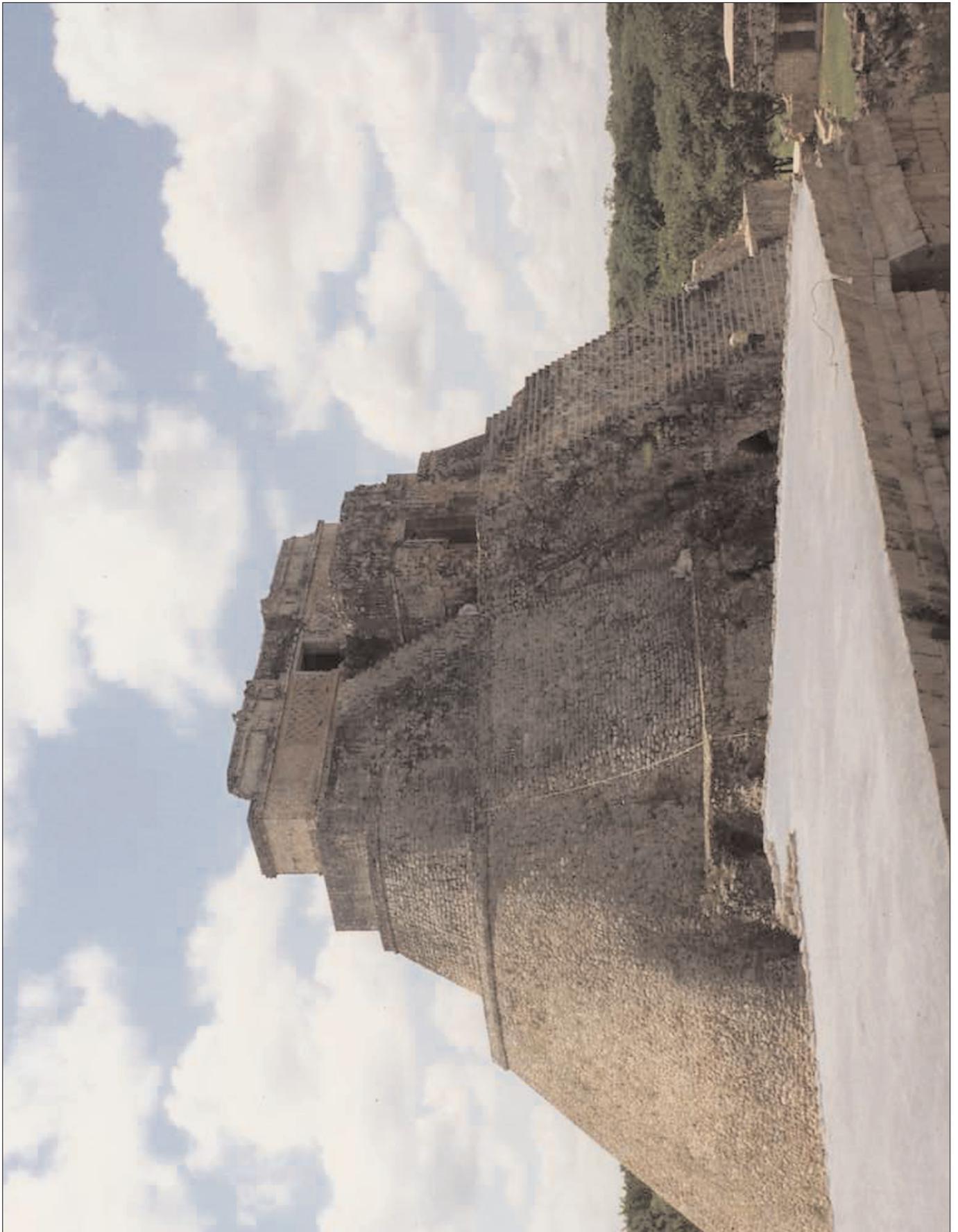


- | | |
|---------------|------------|
| BEANS | RICE |
| CHILE | SALSA |
| CILANTRO | SERRANO |
| FLAUTAS | SPICY |
| MAIZ | TOMATILLOS |
| MOLINA | TOMATE |
| PICO DE GALLO | TORTILLAS |





Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 3: Teotihuacán Temple of Quetzalcoatl



Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 4: Teotihuacán Main Plaza



Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 5: Pyramid at Teotihuacán



Cross-cultural Contributions Visual 6: Mexico City



Flag of Mexico



FLAG OF MEXICO

The colors in the flag are green for hope; white for unity, purity, and honesty; and red for parenthood and the blood of national heroes. The symbol in the center is taken from the Aztec legend of the founding of Tenochtitlán, the ancient Aztec city that became the modern capital—Mexico City.

