

Aztec

Practices

We have a wealth of information about the beliefs and practices of the Aztecs and their extensive and diverse view of both the living world and the realms of the dead.

Death was seen as a necessary concession to the astral forces that gave them the privilege of life. Their ideas of death were clearly transmitted from a place of deep reverence for the universal energy that permitted their creation and survival. This relationship can be seen in their creation myths, where two of the gods sacrificed themselves to create the sun and moon in the current (fifth) epoch. Humans were created by the gods with Quetzalcoatl, the symbol of wisdom, traveling to Mictlan, "the place of the dead," to rescue the "precious bones" of humans of previous ages in order to give life to a new era. After retrieving the bones, Quetzalcoatl, sacrificed his own blood, drawn from his penis, to bring the new humans to life.¹

Because sacrifices had been given by the gods to create men, the Aztec reasoned that they must reciprocate in kind. They also believed that they could keep another cataclysm from happening by giving their blood to keep the sun moving and shining. In fact, they came to regard their existence as the sole cosmic source of energy for the Sun. This warrior mysticism led them to believe that sacred war and sacrifice would preserve the Sun and forever connect death at war with the Giver of Life.²

Their ceremonial centers were divided to reflect their views of all the worlds, both the living and the dead. An immense island divided in four quadrants or directions. The East was the region of light, fertility, and life, symbolized by the color white. The North was the direction of darkness, coldness, and war. It was where the dead were buried and its color was black. The west represented birth and decay, the mystery of origin and end. Its color was red. South, was the region of heat, and tropical weather, its color was blue.³

Aztec conception of the afterlife was such that many factors contributed to determining one's destiny in the afterlife. The Aztecs were very precise in determining one's fate, in life this was done using your birth date. In death, this was dictated by the manner in which you died and in some cases by your occupation in life.⁴

The bodies of the dead were returned to the Mother Earth, Coatlicue, either by cremation or burial, and thus reclaimed back into her womb. The ashes from cremation would also feed her and the god Tlaltechtlia.

However the soul of the individual traveled to a predetermined place, depending on the kind of death. This journey was an arduous voyage for some and a passage to eternal joy for others, with some people being elevated to godlike status. Morality and lifestyle seemed to have little effect on the final resting place.

The soul would end up in one of four places depending on how they died.

- Chichihuacuauhco

The Orchard of the gods meaning literally "in the wet-nurse tree". A paradise who received children whose innocence had been protected as a result of an early death while still nursing. It was thought that the children would either return to repopulate the earth in the next epoch or to a women's womb some time in this epoch.

- Tonatiuh-Ilhuicac

The souls of soldiers fallen at war and the souls of mothers who died in childbirth rested in the Heaven of the Sun. This was perhaps the most desirable ending to an earthly existence because it was considered a place of honor. These souls had the privilege of accompanying the Sun in its daily cycle. The soldiers during

¹ Aguilar – Moreno, Manuel. "Handbook to Life in the Aztec World." N.p., n.d. Web. 05 Aug. 2014 p. 161 – 162

<http://tinyurl.com/q737j66>

² Ibid. p. 162

³ Ibid. p. 162

⁴ Ibid. p. 162

the daylight hours joined the sun and engaged in mock battles and war songs. The women joined the Sun in its nightly descent, carrying him or marching before him while shouting with joy, fighting and praising him.

After four years of joy and happiness, these souls would inhabit clouds. The male warriors were changed into beautiful birds and butterflies that flew freely between heaven and Earth. The women became goddess and returned to their earthly homes where they were sometimes seen by their husbands.

- Tlalocan

The paradise of the rain god, Tlaloc, received individuals specifically chosen by him. It was believed that any who died in a death related to water went there. This included drowning, lightning, dropsy, gout, lepers, mania or tumors. Also children sacrificed to the god.

Such people were always buried. Their remains were seen as seeds that lived and germinated deep within a sacred mountain, which in turn produced water in the form of clouds, rivers, and winds to feed the earth.

The souls of these people became attendants of Tlaloc and were known as "masters of water" and "little winds".

This place was seen as a lush green land always in summer and fed by rain. The souls here existed in blissful tranquility, free from fatigue, worries, and problems.

- Mictlan

The underworld physically understood to be the underbelly of the Earth. A dark region reserved for everyone else regardless of class – a place of uncertainty and mystery.

The lord of the dead, Mictlantecuhtli, and his female companion, Mictlancihuatl ruled this realm.

To reach this realm the dead were required to undertake a long and treacherous journey and overcome nine separate phases. This journey is thought to represent a reverse trip back into the womb.

1. Cross a river called Apanohuaya with the help of a dog (often a puppy) buried with them for this purpose.
2. Naked from crossing the river they had to pass between Tepetl Monamictia, a pair of fierce mountains that constantly crashed against each other.
3. Climb a deadly mountain made of razor-sharp obsidian called Itztepetl.
4. Cross eight gorges (Cehuecayan) in the freezing cold and snow.
5. Cross eight valleys (Itzehecayan) where brutal winds cut through them like a knife.
6. Walk down a path that exposed them to a flurry of innumerable arrows (Temiminaloyan) and have their heart eaten by a jaguar.
7. Cross a mysterious place "where the flags waved" where they would find a lizard or crocodile called Xochitonatl representing the Earth as the ending this ordeal and returning to the Earth.
8. Cross the nine rivers, Chiconamictlan, again with the aid of the Techichi dog.
9. Reach Chiconamictlan (the ninth hell) where they were received by Mictlantecuhtli.

The journey was thought to take four years to complete. At the end of the journey the dead lost their attachment to their physical and earthly self and disintegrated disappearing forever.⁵

The passage of the body and soul from life to death required an intricately orchestration of rituals and mourning. While funerary rites were similar for most people, nobility and women who died in childbirth required special and more elaborate rituals.

Two methods were standard for funerary practices – burial and cremation. Burial were used for people without rank, individuals from other territories, and those who assisted with the task of daily life--the young, the unmarried women, women who died in childbirth and those called by Tlaloc.

Cremation symbolizing the transformation of the soul so that it could live in the heaven of the Sun was reserved for rulers, great lords, and warriors who died in battle or gave their blood.

⁵ Ibid. p. 165 – 166

Fire was seen both as a cleansing element and a means by which people could take items they would need, such as a dog, with them. It was also seen as a way to communicate with the dead and send them both advice for their journey and aid.

Funerary rites occurred in five stages over four years. Stage one was a series of orations to both the deceased and the mourners. First the dead person, whose spirit was still thought to linger, would be addressed, then the mourner or heir.

For non-nobles the eyes were carefully closed, and then the highly revered master of burials would be called. These officials cut up pieces of paper made of tree bark and covered the body, and then poured a vase of water on the person's head (symbolizing the amniotic fluid, because their body was returning to the womb of the Earth). The person was dressed as appropriate for their position in life.

A vessel of water was placed nearby to satisfy the dead's thirst during their journey to the other world, and they were furnished bits of paper to be used as follows during their journey: to pass between the mountains, to safely bypass the serpent, to traverse the lands that were the domain of the crocodile, to traverse the seven deserts, to go through the eight hills, and to defend against the north winds.

One of the principal ceremonies was killing the dog that would accompany them. The dog was always yellow in color. A cord was put around the animal's neck so it could cross the river and it was then either buried or cremated at the same time the person was buried.

If the person was being cremated their body was put in a fetal position and they were burned with resinous pinewood along with the tools of their trade. The master of ceremonies would burn incense around the pyre and intone a funeral hymn. The ashes were placed in an earthen vase that contained at its bottom a green jewel (to serve as the deceased heart). The vase was then interred in a deep hole and for four days was covered with offerings of bread and wine.

If the body was buried the actual burial occurred 80 days after death. The body was often shown as being put into a fetal position. The ritual of burning an effigy was repeated at this time and performed once a year for four years on the anniversary of death, at which time it was believed the person had arrived in Mictlan. If the person was a warrior mourners would wait to bathe and groom themselves after the 80 days.

Another ritual consisted of keeping the energy of the deceased close to the family by cutting locks of hair from the top of the head and mixing these with locks cut at birth. These were kept in a vessel stored near the home of the deceased.

Royal funerals were even more elaborate and magnificent. Royalty was buried with many of their rich possessions. Nobles and slaves gathered and a great rite took place that culminated in the cremation of the king. The slaves who had tended the king were sacrificed so they could continue to serve him. (See Handbook to Life in the Aztec World by Manuel Aguilar for more details on the Royal funerals).

Merchants were treated as special cases because of the long periods they spent traveling. Merchants were buried with a feather object in their mouth. The hollows of his eyes were painted black and his mouth red. His body was striped with white soils. His peers dressed him in paper and dressed him. The body was tightly wrapped and bound onto a wooden frame or carrying racks and taken to the nearest hill or mountaintop. The body was buried while a companion stood guard. It was believed that merchants went to Tonatiuh-Illuicac along with the warriors and women who died at birth.

Women who died in childbirth were also believed to be destined for to Tonatiuh-Illuicac. They were treated with equal reverence as soldiers. They were dressed in their best outfits, their head and hair was washed and her hair was left loose and untied. Midwives and old women gathered to accompany the body; they carried shields and swords and make war cries. Young men came out from school to meet them and struggle with them, attempting to seize the woman's body. The woman was buried in the courtyard of the temple of goddesses called the heavenly women. Her husband, relatives and friends guarded her body for four days. These women became formidable deities of the twilight, and on certain nights appeared at crossroads striking those they met with paralysis.

Cemeteries were not common in the Aztec world, instead people were interred in fields and near their homes, showing that the deceased was considered still a part of the family. Newborn and very small infants were buried in or close to the family corn bins, perhaps to guarantee the growth of the corn.

Deities and Important Concepts

- **Quetzalcoatl "The Feathered Serpent"**
The most famous of the Aztec gods. This god of the west, the morning star, of priesthood, of learning and knowledge. He was responsible for allowing humans to be created.
- **Tlaloc**
One of the most ancient Meso-American gods. He was the god of rain and was associated with fertility and agriculture. The Aztecs believed that the cries and tears of newborn children were sacred to the god.
- **Coatlicue "The Mother of Gods", "Serpent Skirt"**
A major Aztec deity. The earth-mother goddess. Represented as an old woman, she symbolized the antiquity of earth worship. She gave birth to the first set of gods. The patron of childbirth, she was associated with warfare, governance and agriculture.
- **Mictlantecuhtli and Mictlantecihuatl**
King and Queen of the most common underworld.

Modern Adaptations

- Start the funeral by addressing the deceased. Perhaps telling about how they will be missed.
- The way the person is honored should reflect how they died and/or their profession. I would extend the traditional deaths as shown here.
 - Anyone considered a child when they died would be spoken of as going to Chichihuacuauhco where they are given everything they need. It should be stated that they will be born again so that they can experience the potential that they never got to explore.
 - Any person who served as a soldier would be spoken of as going to Tonatiuh-Ilhuicac.
It would be especially appropriate to release butterflies as these funerals.
 - A woman who has given birth in her life would also be revered as going to Tonatiuh-Ilhuicac.
These women can be honored as speaking of them as becoming ancestral goddess how will continue to look after their home and family.
 - Anyone who would be considered a merchant and spent a lot of time away from family would also be considered to be going to Tonatiuh-Ilhuicac.
 - Those whose deaths related to water, including dieing from tumors would go to the realm of Tlalocan. They should be buried if they can be.
 - Everyone else would be said to be going to Mictlan. The journey to Mictlan can be seen as a losing of one's ego so that they can merge with the ancestors.
A picture of a dog should be placed with the remains of the deceased. If the person had an animal cremated and ashes are available it may be appropriate to also place the ashes with the person.
The dog should be seen as a symbol that no one makes any journey completely alone.
Pieces of paper with the steps of the journey can be burned with the hope that the deceased will complete the journey as they need in order to go back to the source of all things.
- Including a responsive reading would be very appropriate.
- Speak of the body returning to the earth but the spirit going to the afterlife.

Sample Readings

You can find some of these by doing a search on Nahuatl poems. Nahuatl, was the language spoken by the Aztecs. I have selected a few that I thought were especially appropriate.

Composed by a certain ruler in memory of former rulers⁶

1. Weeping, I, the singer, weave my song of flowers of sadness; I call to memory the youths, the shards, the fragments, gone to the land of the dead; once noble and powerful here on earth, the youths were dried up like feathers, were split into fragments like an emerald, before the face and in the sight of those who saw them on earth, and with the knowledge of the Cause of All.

2. Alas! alas! I sing in grief as I recall the children. Would that I could turn back again; would that I could grasp their hands once more; would that I could call them forth from the land of the dead; would that we could bring them again on earth, that they might rejoice and we rejoice, and that they might rejoice and delight the Giver of Life; is it possible that we His servants should reject him or should be ungrateful? Thus I weep in my heart as I, the singer, review my memories, recalling things sad and grievous.

3. Would only that I knew they could hear me, there in the land of the dead, were I to sing some worthy song. Would that I could gladden them, that I could console the suffering and the torment of the children. How can it be learned? Whence can I draw the inspiration? They are not where I may follow them; neither can I reach them with my calling as one here on earth.

Cuicatli quicaqui⁷

I changed the original wording as follows to make it more understandable. "My heart hearts a song" to "my heart feels a song," and "garlands flower" to "garland flowers."

My heart feels a song,
I begin to cry.
Already I know myself.
We go among flowers.
We will leave the earth here.
We are loaned to one another.
We go to His house.

Put on me a necklace
Of varied flowers.
They are in my hands,
Garland flowers on me.
We will leave the earth here.
We are loaned to one another.
We go to His house.

Flowers are our only garments by Nezahualcoyotl⁸

*Note: The following is an example of a typical responsive poem. The phrases with *ohuaya* are the responses and are similar to something like *tralala*. From what I was able to find it is pronounced *Oh-why-ye*.*

Flowers are our only garments,
only songs make our pain subside,
diverse flowers on earth,
Ohuaya ohuaya.

Perhaps my friends will be lost,
my companions will vanish
when I lie down in that place, I Yoyontzin –*Ohuaya!*–
in the place of song and of Life Giver,
Ohuaya ohuaya.

⁶ Brinton, Daniel G. "The Project Gutenberg EBook of Ancient Nahuatl Poetry." N.p., 30 Apr. 2004. Web. 12 Aug. 2014. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12219/12219-h/12219-h.htm#IX>

⁷ "Nahuatl Poetry." N.p., n.d. Web. 12 Aug. 2014. <http://www2.potsdam.edu/schwaljf/Nahuatl/poetry.ht>

⁸ "Aztec Poetry: Three Poems." N.p., n.d. Web. 12 Aug. 2014. <http://www.mexicolore.co.uk/aztecs/home/aztec-poetry-2-three-poems>

Does no one know where we are going?
Do we go to God's home or
do we live only here on earth?

Ah ohuaya.

Let your hearts know,
oh princes, oh eagles and jaguars
that we will not be friends forever,
only for a moment here, then we go
to Life Giver's home.
Ohuaya ohuaya.

Resources

- Handbook to Life in the Aztec World by Manuel Aguilar – Moreno 2006
Starting at page 160
<http://tinyurl.com/q737j66>
- Who goes to Mictlan?
<http://blog.zoesaadia.com/historia-en-el-calmeccac/who-goes-to-mictlan/>