The Nahua of Mexico

Introduction

The inhabitants of Central Mexico today are classified as Nahua if they speak the Nahuatl Language. Nahuatl is the southernmost major branch of the Uto-Aztecan family, which historically stretched from the western United States and spread throughout central Mexico. Today, approximately 1.5 million people speak the Nahuatl language in Mexico, according to the 2000 Mexican Census (INEGI, 2000). Although the Aztecs were probably the most famous Mesoamerican civilization, several other important pre-columbian civilizations also had Nahua ethnicity, such as the Toltec, Tepaneca, Acholhua (Leon-Portilla 1992).

Part 1: A History

It is important to look at the history of the Nahua, because they possess a unique blend of their original culture mixed with many Spanish traditions. This comes from the period of conquest, when Cortés and his men appeared and forced the Nahua into submission in order to obtain their wealth. The Nahua culture has long since been influenced by Spanish religion and values but some of the old rituals and beliefs remain, resulting in its modern form.

1A: Pre-Conquest
The Nahua entered Mexico during a time where many groups were vying for power, around 1250 C.E.; they were likely immigrants from the northern frontier. Their Mythic home was called Aztlan. (Schwartz 2000). The Nahua spoke their own language, Nahuatl, but did not have a true writing system before the Spanish arrived (Schwartz 2000). The Mexica were a group of Nahua, though not all Nahua were Mexica. The Mexica settled on Lake Texcoco around 1325, where according to their legends, an eagle perched on a cactus while eating a snake. Because this was a message from the gods, this is where they established their capital (Schwartz 2000). Their capital was called Tenochtitlan in the center of Lake Texcoco. It was "the political, symbolic, and ritual center of their universe," (Schwartz 2000, p6). By 1470 they were the major power in central Mexico, and they collected tribute from peoples across hundreds of miles (Schwartz 2000). Sacrificial tribute became a way of life, likely as a result of the militarization of society. Tenochtitlan conquered and absorbed the neighboring city, Tlatelolco. They formed alliances with some neighboring cities, but remained bitter enemies with others. By the early 1500's the extent of the Mexica was at its greatest point of influence, but its power was on thin ice. They were ruled over by their tlatoani (Speaker) (Schwartz 2000). The indigenous religion of the Nahua included many different gods and goddesses, most often relating to nature, agriculture, aspects of life, and cosmology. (Schwartz 2000)

1B: Conquest

When Cortés arrived, some of the Nahua cities that were traditional rivals with the Mexica sided with him, such as Tlaxcala, Huejotzinco, and Cholula. Cortés’ goal was to take the city of Tenochtitlan because of its wealth, and to do this he had to defeat Moctezuma, its leader. There is much controversy as to whether the leader of the Mexica believed Cortés was in fact a Toltec god known as Quetzalcoatl, prophesied to return and reclaim his throne, because there is little clear evidence as to why he he remained inactive for so long after Cortés’ initial arrival (Schwartz 2000). Cortés took control of the city on the infamous night (Noche Triste), through a combination of luck and superior technology. The weapons of the conquistadors did clearly outmatch those of the Nahua, but smallpox was a key factor in greatly weakening their forces (Schwartz 2000). The Spanish quickly set about converting those Nahua left alive to Catholicism, and teaching them how to live like Europeans (Schwartz 2000). The The Nahua were considered below the Spanish in class, and were often made to work as slave labor (Schwartz 2000).

Part 2: Nahua Culture

2A: Politics

Within modern Nahau culture there is a clear political structure. The supreme authority over communities is the Asamblea General, which is composed of household heads. They meet on a regular basis in order to discuss and vote on issues pertaining to the government and policymaking (Sandstrom 1991). There are several elected committees under the Asamblea General, including the General Assembly, Vigilance Council, Committee of the Municipal Agent, Auxiliary Judge, School Parents Committee, and the Committee for the Integral Development of the Family. In these groups there are different presidents and council members, and police officers in the Municipal Agent Committee (Sandstrom 1991). There is also a group of 6 to 8 men, who are usually in their 70’s known as the “elders.” Others look to them for their guidance and authority, yet there is no formal installation of this group of men, through voting or another method. It is assumed on them. (Sandstrom 1991).

2B: Social Structure

Age and generation play a large part in the Nahau lifestyle. Members of a community look to their elders for advice (Sandstrom 1991). Within a family, labor is divided among each member. The men must make sure that the family is taken care of, has shelter and food to eat. Women take care of domestic responsibilities, making sure there is always clean water to drink. Young boys receive their first piece of land when they reach the age of 8 or 9, in order to teach them responsibility (Sandstrom 1991). Young girls are given the task of looking after any younger siblings they have while their mother works. Girls usually marry in their late teens, while boys wait until they are in their 20s (Sandstrom 1991). Even though the Nahua track their family lines bilaterally, an emphasis is placed on the patrilateral lineage (Sandstrom 1996).
Nahuas generally marry within their own village, but sometimes they do not, as they cannot marry a first or second cousin. A marriage, however, is usually not seen as legitimized until they have children (Sandstrom 1991). Traditionally, the new wife would initially move into her husband’s father’s house. Once the couple either had children or could afford to build their own house, they would leave the father’s residence and move close by (Chevalier & Buckles 1995).

The domestic group is central to the Nahua’s social life and structure. These domestic groups share a common interest and budget and can be composed of more than just a nuclear family. In some instances it includes the nuclear family, and members of patrilocal or matrilocal extended families. In other cases, members are those who share crop storage and fields. (Sandstrom 1996). Besides depending on their parents and brothers for help, there are several rituals where close friends are named co-parent or godparents. In times of need when the blood family cannot help, due to lack of resources, distance or a number of other things, the appointed persons can be relied upon (Sandstrom 1991).

2C: Kinship

The importance of kinship ties was a central aspect of traditional Nahua society, yet no word exists in Nahuatl that represents our traditional idea of family. Rather than focusing on the physical relatedness of family members, the Nahua conception of kinship emphasized the household, or the setting in which joint life takes place (Lockhart, 1992). Households at the time of the Spanish conquest in the 16th century usually consisted of multiple families (McCaa 2003). Elders were treated with much respect and descent was traced patrilineally. In the case of the Nauha, it was the youngest son that was favored for descent and inherited his father’s land and responsibilities. If a family only had daughters, a son-in-law would inherit the home and land rights (Chevalier & Buckles 1995).

Today, two-thirds of all households in Souther Mexico consist only of the nuclear family, meaning two parents and at least one child under 20 (Chevalier & Buckles 1995). The role of elders has been much diminished as a result of an increase in public schools and role of literate youth in local government activities. Rules of inheritance have also changed. Among the lower class, many native peasant no longer own property to pass down. However, wealthy land owners tend to divide the land amongst all of their sons and in some cases, their wives, daughters, and mistresses as well (Chevalier & Buckles 1995).

2D: Subsistence

Prior to conquest, the rich-permanent-site agriculture gave the Nahua preeminence in population size over areas of southern Mesoamerican (Lockhart, 1992). The fertile lands of the Nahua allowed for crops such as maize, beans, squash, and chilies to prosper (Leon-Portilla, 1992). The Nahua utilized several different methods of agriculture. One was known as dry farming, which means that agriculture was dependent on rainfall and used some sort of fertilizer or irrigation. Another form of agriculture was chitampa, incorrectly called “floating garden” technique of swamp drainage and raised plots. The ancient Nahua greatly enhanced their wealth and power through the institutions of tribute and trade. The Nahua were very successful in these. It permitted the capital, Tenochtitlan, to export a variety of manufactured consumer and luxury goods.
Today, slash-and-burn agriculture is practiced throughout Southern Mexico, with maize, beans, and squash being the main harvests. The amount of land cultivated annually increased as a result of a government maize program, which aimed to "improve national and international food security and alleviate poverty through research in maize and wheat, while protecting the natural resources on which future productivity depends" (CIMMYT 2009). Cattle ranching is another major form of subsistence, as well as a major aspect of southern Mexico's economy. In 1980, there were approximately 400,000 farms and over 2,000,000 heads of cattle in Central America and exported more than 150,000 tons of beef (Myers 1981).

Figure 5: Sacrifice among the ancient Aztec (www.wilsonsalmanac.com/aztecs_and_cortes.html)

2E: Religion

The ancient Nahua-/Mesoamerican- religion was composed of a highly complex system of gods, myths, rituals and beliefs (Smith 2003). "The pantheon of deities possessed specific iconographic attributes and were embodied in images inhabiting sumptuous temples. With this pantheon came a hierarchy of religious specialists who were responsible for overseeing the observance of festivals. Sacrifice was done by all levels of the population, while divination and a shamanistic rituals tended to affect everyday life" (Lockhart, 1992). It was believed that the hearts of the victims nourished the gods and that certain victims embodied gods (Graulich 2000).

After the Spanish conquest, the Nahua were easily converted to Christianity. According to Nahua religion, one expected the conqueror to impose his god in some way, without fully displacing one’s own, and therefore creating a new god who was a mixture of both ideologies (Lockhart, 1992). Today, Nahua religion is a syncretism of Spanish Roman Catholic religion and indigenous belief. However, Catholicism continues to spread throughout Mexico and traditional beliefs are becoming less and less common (Haly, 1996). In the 2000 census, 88% of the population of Mexico identified themselves as Roman Catholic (Library of Congress 2008).

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