

## **Aztec Beliefs**

Enquiry: How far did fear allow the Aztecs to control their Empire

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# Legends and Myths

According to legend, when the Mexica arrived in Lake Texcoco, they were considered by the other groups as the least civilized of people of all.

The Aztecs adopted and combined several traditions with their own earlier traditions which meant they had several creation myths.

One of these, the Five Suns describes four great ages preceding the present world, each of which ended in a catastrophe (Think back to lesson 1).



# Legend or myth?

**Coatlicue** found a ball filled with feathers and placed it in her waistband, becoming pregnant with **Huitzilopochtli** (deity of sun and war). Her other children became suspicious as to the identity of the father and vowed to kill their mother. Coatlicue gave birth on Mount Coatepec, pursued by her children, but the newborn Huitzilopochtli defeated most of his brothers, who became the stars.



# Legend or myth continued..

He also killed his half-sister by tearing out her heart, using a blue snake, and throwing her body down the mountain. This was said to inspire the Aztecs to rip the hearts out of their human sacrifices and throw their bodies down the sides of the temple dedicated to Huitzilopochtli, who represents the sun chasing away the stars at dawn.



# Fifth Creation

The Aztecs believed that it took the gods five attempts to create the world since they kept fighting each other. According to the myth, all the gods had gathered to sacrifice themselves and create a new age. Although the world and the sun had already been created, it would only be through their sacrifice that the sun would be set into motion and time as well as history could begin. The most handsome and strongest of the gods, **Tecuciztecatl**, was supposed to sacrifice himself but when it came time to self-immolate, he could not jump into the fire.



## **Fifth Creation continued...**

Instead, **Nanahuatl**, the smallest and humblest of the gods, sacrificed himself first and jumped into the flames. Thus, the sun was set into motion with his sacrifice and time began.

Humiliated by Nanahuatl's sacrifice, Tecuciztecatl too leaped into the fire and became the moon. The other gods sacrificed themselves to form a wind that would move the sun through the sky. This creation wasn't free - Aztecs believed that they had to sacrifice to repay the gods and keep the sun moving. However, mainly those who were prisoners or criminals were often sacrificed first.



# Glossary

**Coatlicue** : Earth - mother Goddess

**Huitzilopochtli**: Deity of sun and war and sacrifice

**Tecuciztecatl**: God of the moon

**Nanahuat**: Sun God



# Comprehension Questions

1. What did Coatlicue's children want to do when they found out she was pregnant?

Sentence starter: Coatlicue's children wanted to...

2. What did Huitzilopochtli do to his siblings?
3. How did time begin, according to the Aztecs?
4. How did the Aztecs repay the Gods?

Challenge: Do you think the Aztecs carried out human sacrifice out of fear or loyalty to the Gods?





**Sort the following cards in to two categories:**

**A - Things that would have kept Aztec people loyal through fear**

**B- Things that would have kept Aztec people loyal through devotion and adoration**

Consuming the flesh of a person offered to the gods was like communing with the gods, themselves. As off-putting as it sounds, some argue that ritual cannibalism most likely existed among the Aztecs and would have been considered not only normal, but a great honor.



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The rationale for Aztec human sacrifice was, a matter of survival. According to Aztec cosmology, the sun god Huitzilopochtli was waging a constant war against darkness, and if the darkness won, the world would end. To keep the sun moving across the sky and preserve their very lives, the Aztecs had to feed Huitzilopochtli with human hearts and blood.



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Some battles provided an important venue for young Aztec warriors to gain social status. By bringing home a gaggle of captives, some of whom would ultimately be sacrificed. This would bring them honour and they would be seen as having been victorious in helping their empire.



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DNA tests of recovered victims who had been sacrificed, from the Templo Mayor site, show that the vast majority of those sacrificed were outsiders, likely enemy soldiers or slaves.



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To give your heart to Huitzilopochtli was a tremendous honor and a guaranteed ticket to a blessed afterlife fighting in the sun god's army against the forces of darkness.



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Human sacrifice also served another purpose in the expanding Aztec empire of the 15th and 16th century: intimidation. The ritual killing of war captives and the large-scale displaying of skulls were reminders of the strength of the empire and the extent of its power.



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Conquered city-states were allowed to maintain their current rulers and religion so long as they met several requirements such as supporting the Aztec Empire paying tribute to Tenochtitlan, and including the Aztec Sun God in their own religious beliefs.



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The Tepanec used the Aztec to help with their battles and campaigns in the region against other rival societies. For their help the Aztecs received portions of the wealth that the Tepanec gathered from the societies that they defeated. Later, the Aztecs joined an alliance to overthrow the Tepanec and become more powerful than them.





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Although the expansion of the empire was often good for the conquered people as it gave them better trade and infrastructure, for example, the conquered people still obeyed in fear. Their hatred would cause many of them to turn on the empire when the Spanish gave them the chance.

