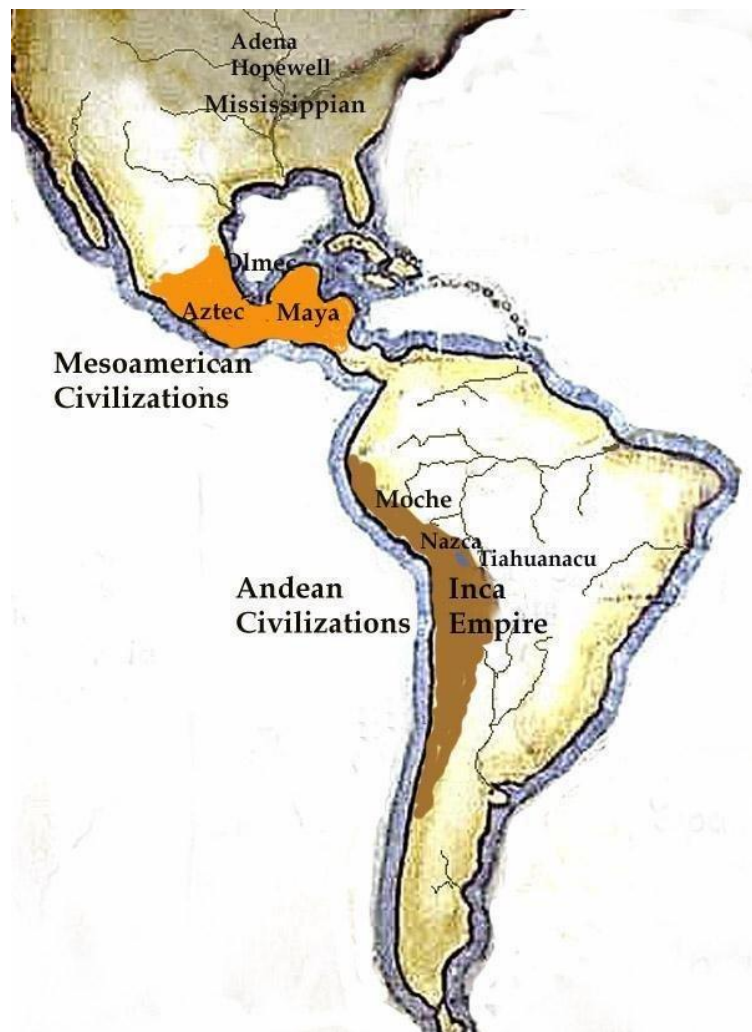


## 20: Aztec-Spanish Conflict *Cultural Difference*

---

### Background

While Roman soldiers were conquering the Mediterranean region, across the Atlantic Ocean other civilizations were growing. In Central and South America, the inhabitants developed complex societies, and built great cities with thousands of carefully-crafted buildings, huge pyramids, and temples. They devised complex mathematical systems and calendars, systems for writing, and ways of producing and distributing food and other goods and services. These civilizations included kings, priests, artists, warriors, and merchants.



<http://gallery.sjsu.edu/sacrifice/precolumbian.html>

Original Material copyright ©2016 by Marion Brady and Howard Brady. This material may be downloaded and printed at no cost by teachers or mentors for use with their own students only. All other rights reserved.

Some of these civilizations, such as the Olmec and Maya, were highly developed, rich, and powerful, but for reasons not known—possibly drought and famine—the inhabitants abandoned their cities, temples and kings. Similar civilizations, Aztecs and Incas, formed later and were successful and thriving when the Spanish arrived in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century.



Above: Mayan constructions at Uxmal, on the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico.

<http://www.history.com/topics/ancient-history/pyramids-in-latin-america/pictures/mesoamerican-pyramids/mayan-pyramid-at-uxmal>

Below: Pyramids at Teotihuacan, just northeast of Mexico City. The largest was completed about 100 CE, long before Aztec civilization started.



<http://schullns.com/latest-news/tenochtitlan-aztec-pyramids/>

## Investigation: Aroused Emotions

When societies with differing ways of life (i.e. different cultures) confront each other, the differences in their patterns of actions, beliefs and values often arouse emotions and may lead to conflict. Actions considered completely acceptable in one society may be unacceptable in another.

*Working with others, analyze the accounts in this unit and find situations in which emotions are aroused. Identify (1) the kind of emotion that is aroused (e.g. “anger” or “fear”), (2) the ideas or action patterns that triggered the aroused emotions, and (3) possible reasons why an individual or group reacted. Record the results of your analysis in your journal.*

### Historical background:<sup>1</sup>

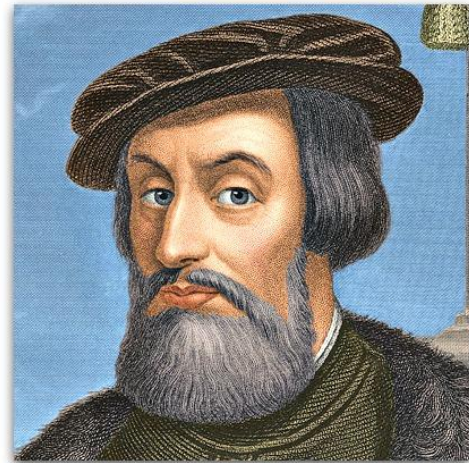
In October 1518, in Spanish-occupied Cuba, Hernando Cortés was appointed to head an expedition to explore what is now Mexico in Central America. (Some Spanish exploration of the area along the coast had been done a bit earlier.)

While Cortés was collecting ships, men and supplies, he lost the support of Velázquez, the Spanish governor. Velázquez removed him from command of the expedition, but Cortés ignored his orders and set sail in February 1519 with about 600 Spaniards and eleven ships.

Landing in what’s now the province of Tabasco in March, Cortés allied himself with the local natives who told him about the powerful Aztec Empire and its ruler, Montezuma.

Cortés then sailed north up the coast, founded the town of Veracruz as a Spanish base of operations, and had himself elected Captain General and Chief Justice of the territory. He then burned his ships, leaving his men no choice but to survive by conquering the natives.

Hernando Cortés ►



<http://www.biography.com/people/hern%C3%A1n-cort%C3%A9s-9258320>

---

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from <http://www.robinsonlibrary.com/america/mexico/history/cortes.htm>

News reached the Aztec ruler, Montezuma<sup>1</sup> in the city of Tenochtitlán, (now Mexico City) about the arrival on the east coast of strange people traveling on “floating mountains” [*large ships*]. He sent messengers to investigate, with gifts for the arriving “gods.” Years later, a native observer described the return of the messengers to Tenochtitlán to report their experiences:<sup>2</sup>

The messengers went to the House of the Serpent, and Montezuma arrived. He ordered two prisoners to be brought and they were sacrificed. Their chests were torn open, and the messengers were sprinkled with their blood. This was done because the messengers had completed a difficult mission. They had seen the gods, their eyes had looked on their faces. They had even conversed with the gods!

When the sacrifice was finished, the messengers reported to the king. They told him how they had made the journey, and what they had seen, and what food the strangers ate. Montezuma was astonished and terrified by their report...

He was also terrified to learn how the cannon roared, how its noise echoed, how it caused those nearby to faint and grow deaf. The messengers told him: “A thing like a ball of stone comes out of its entrails: it comes out shooting sparks and raining fire. The smoke that comes out with it has a foul odor, like rotten mud. This odor penetrates to the brain and causes great discomfort. If the cannon is aimed against a mountain, the mountain splits and cracks open. If it is aimed against a tree, it shatters the tree into splinters. This is a most unnatural sight, as if the tree had exploded from within.”

The messengers also said: “Their trappings and arms are all made of white metal [*steel*]. They dress in this white metal and wear white metal covers on their heads. Their swords, their bows, their shields, and their spears are all made of this white metal.

“Their deer carry them on their backs wherever they wish to go. These deer, our lord, are as tall as the roof of a house.

“The strangers’ bodies are completely covered, so that only their faces can be seen. Their skin is white, as if it were made of lime. They have yellow hair, though some of them have black. Their beards are long and yellow, and their moustaches are also yellow. Their hair is curly, with very fine strands.”

(Continued)

---

<sup>1</sup> In the accounts, the name is usually given as “Motecuhzoma.”

<sup>2</sup> Miguel León-Portilla, a Mexican anthropologist, compiled native accounts of the Spanish conquest of Mexico, publishing them in *Visión de los Vencidos (Vision of the Vanquished, 1959)* to present a chronological account from the perspective of the Indians of Mexico, including the Mexica (Aztec) and the Tlaxcala. This section adapted from the *Cronica Mexicana*, accounts compiled by Fernando Alvarado Tezozomoc, the grandson of Motecuhzoma, around 1578. [http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/amerbegin/contact/text7/mexica\\_tlaxcala.pdf](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/amerbegin/contact/text7/mexica_tlaxcala.pdf)

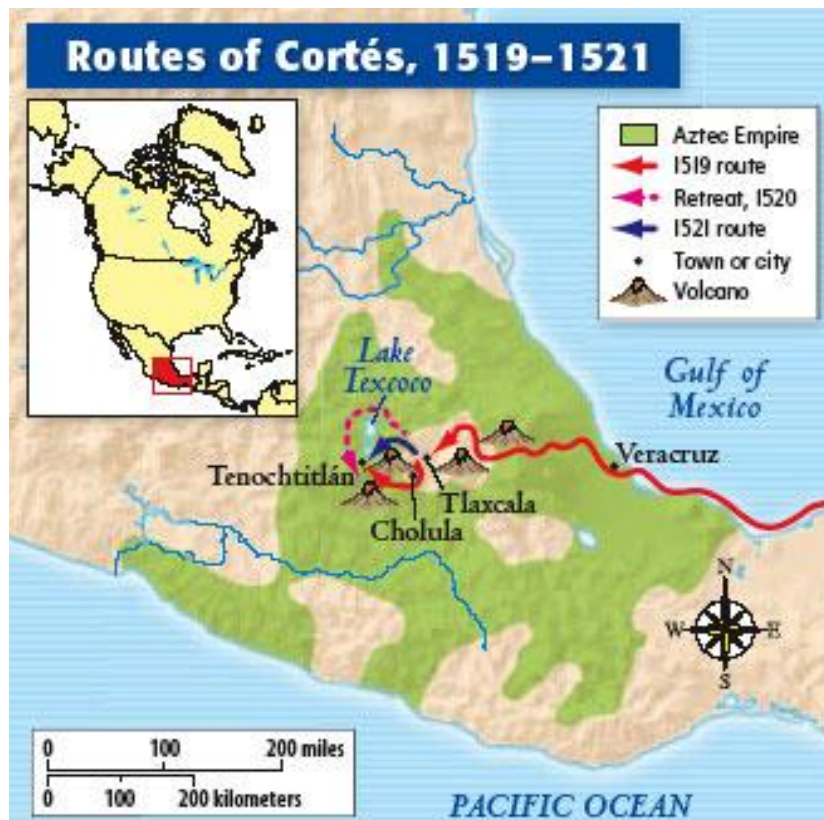
Montezuma then sent out his most gifted men, his prophets and wizards, as many as he could gather. He also sent out his noblest and bravest warriors. They had to take their provisions with them on the journey: live hens [*small native fowl*] and hens' eggs and tortillas. They also took whatever the strangers might request, or whatever might please them.

Montezuma also sent captives to be sacrificed, because the strangers might wish to drink their blood.

The envoys sacrificed these captives in the presence of the strangers, but when the white men saw this, they were filled with disgust and loathing. They spat on the ground, or wiped away their tears, or closed their eyes and shook their heads in abhorrence. They refused to eat the food that was sprinkled with blood, because it reeked of it; it sickened them, as if the blood had rotted.

Montezuma ordered the sacrifice because he took the Spaniards to be gods; he believed in them and worshiped them as deities. That is why they were called "Gods who have come from heaven."

By August 1519, Cortés was ready to march inland to the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán (now Mexico City). Along the way he was able to persuade thousands of Indians to join him, most of them willingly because they hated the Aztecs. Several battles with armies of native warriors were fought on the way, with some Spanish deaths and injuries.



<http://www.fggam.org/2014/12/american-minute-cortes-mexico-god-glory-gold/>

A native describes the advance of Cortés' army, accompanied by warriors from Tlaxcala, toward the Aztec capital:<sup>1</sup>

When the Spaniards entered the province of Cholula, they quickly destroyed that city because of the great trouble caused by its inhabitants. So many Cholultecas [*residents of Cholula*] were killed in this invasion that the news raced through the land as far as the City of Mexico (Tenochtitlán). There it caused the most horrible fright and dismay, for it was also known that the Tlaxcaltecas [*residents of Tlaxcala*] had allied themselves with the “gods” (as the Spaniards were called in all parts of this New World, for lack of another name).

The Cholultecas had placed such confidence in their idol Quetzalcoatl [*“feathered serpent”*] that they believed no human power could defeat or harm them. They thought they would be able to vanquish us in a very short time—first, because the Spaniards were so few, and second, because the Tlaxcaltecas had brought them against Cholula by deceit. Their faith in the idol was so complete that they believed it would overwhelm their enemies with the fire and thunder of heaven, and drown them in a vast flood of water.

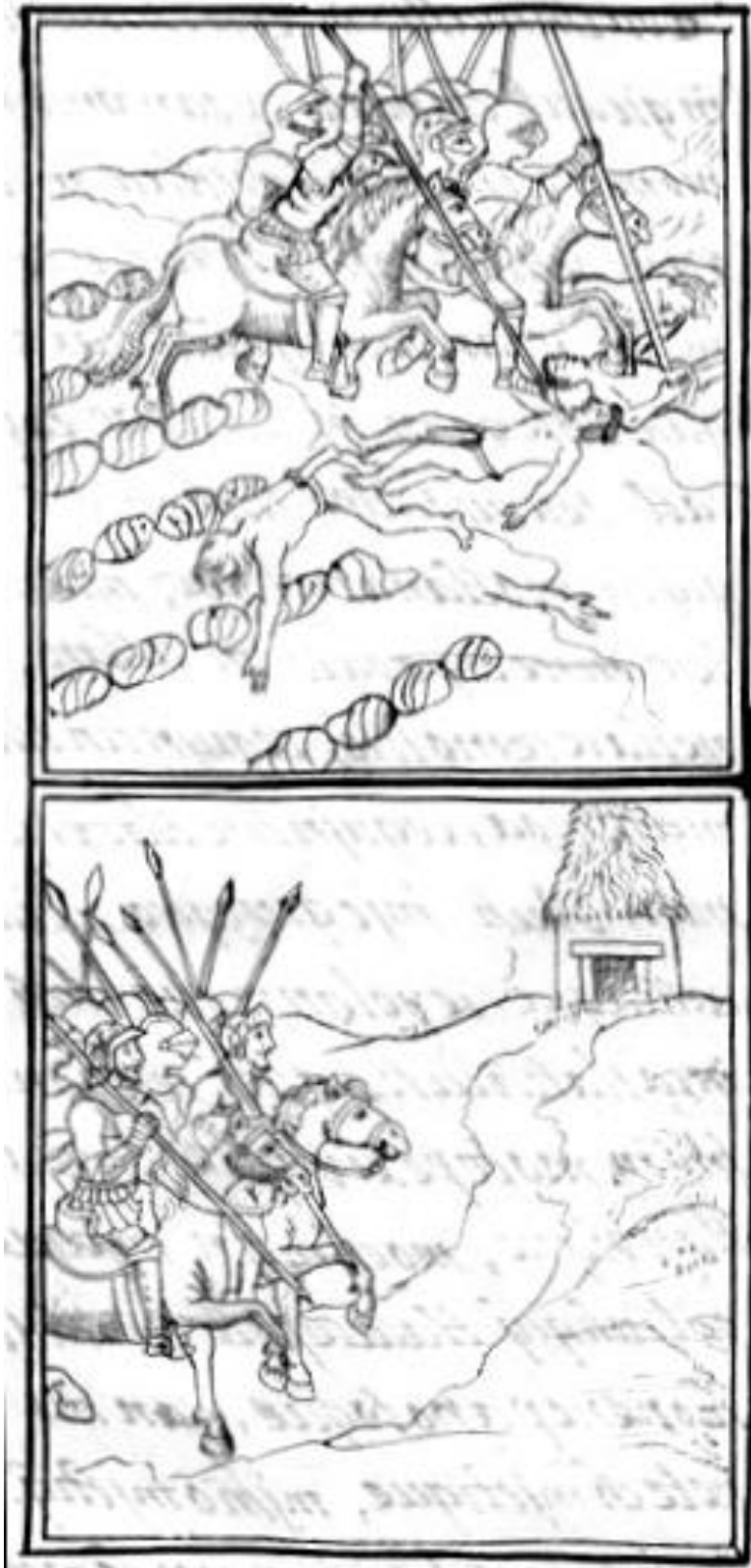
This is what they believed, and they proclaimed it in loud voices: “Let the strangers come! We will see if they are so powerful! Our god Quetzalcoatl is here with us, and they can never defeat him. Let them come, the weaklings: we are waiting to see them, and we laugh at their stupid delusions. They are fools or madmen if they trust in these evil doers from Tlaxcala, who are nothing but women... We are waiting, and you will see how our god Quetzalcoatl punishes his foes!”

They shouted these and other similar insults, because they believed that their enemy would surely be consumed by bolts of fire which would fall from heaven, and that great rivers of water would pour from the temples of their idols to drown both the Tlaxcaltecas and the Spanish soldiers. This caused the Tlaxcaltecas much fear and concern, for they believed that all would happen as the Cholultecas predicted. The priests of the temple of Quetzalcoatl yelled out their threats at the top of their voices.

But then the Tlaxcaltecas heard the Spaniards call out to St. James, and saw them burn the temples and hurl the idols to the ground, and violently disrespect these gods. When they saw that the idols were powerless, that no flames fell and no rivers poured out, then they understood that their beliefs about the gods and idols were all lies.

---

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from *Historia de Tlaxcala*, accounts compiled by Diego Muñoz Camargo, 1585.  
[http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/amerbegin/contact/text7/mexica\\_tlaxcala.pdf](http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/amerbegin/contact/text7/mexica_tlaxcala.pdf)



*General History of the Things of New Spain (The Florentine Codex). Book XII: The Conquest of Mexico*

This book, a “codex” (book handwritten in ink) by Benedictine missionary Fray Bernardino de Sahagún contains accounts he collected from Mexican natives, Aztecs and others, who remembered the Spanish conquest. It contains many hand-drawn illustrations like the ones on this page, done by a native artist. (The writing on the other side of the page shows through.)

The primary sources written from the native point of view in this unit are translations from accounts in this and other codex books.

<https://www.wdl.org/en/item/10623/view/1/93/>

La Malinche in the following account was a native woman from near the coast, given to the Spanish as a slave, who spoke Mayan and Nahuatl (the language of the Aztecs), and who quickly learned Spanish and acted as a translator for the Spaniards. When Cortés reached Tenochtitlán in November he found that word of his arrival had preceded him. When he entered the city, Cortés was met by Montezuma.<sup>1</sup>

When Montezuma had given necklaces to each one, Cortés asked him: "Are you Montezuma? Are you the king? Is it true that you are the king Montezuma?"

And the king said: "Yes, I am Montezuma." Then he stood up to welcome Cortés; he came forward, bowed his head low and addressed him in these words: "Our lord, you are weary. The journey has tired you, but now you have arrived on the earth. You have come to your city, Mexico. You have come here to sit on your throne, to sit under its canopy.

"The kings who have gone before, your representatives, guarded it and preserved it for your coming. The kings Itzcoatl, Montezuma the Elder, Axayacatl, Tizoc and Ahuitzotl ruled for you in the City of Mexico. The people were protected by their swords and sheltered by their shields.

"Do the kings know the destiny of those they left behind, their posterity? If only they are watching! If only they can see what I see!

"No, it is not a dream. I am not walking in my sleep. I am not seeing you in my dreams.... I have seen you at last! I have met you face to face! I was in agony for five days, for ten days, with my eyes fixed on the Region of the Mystery. And now you have come out of the clouds and mists to sit on your throne again.

"This was foretold by the kings who governed your city, and now it has taken place. You have come back to us; you have come down from the sky. Rest now, and take possession of your royal houses. Welcome to your land, my lords! "

When Montezuma had finished, La Malinche translated his address into Spanish so the Captain could understand it.

Cortés replied in his strange and savage tongue, speaking first to La Malinche: "Tell Montezuma that we are his friends. There is nothing to fear. We have wanted to see him for a long time, and now we have seen his face and heard his words. Tell him that we love him well and that our hearts are contented."

Then he said to Montezuma: "We have come to your house in Mexico as friends. There is nothing to fear."

La Malinche translated this speech and the Spaniards grasped Montezuma's hands and patted his back to show their affection for him....

---

<sup>1</sup> From Miguel Leon-Portilla, ed., *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), pp. 6466, 129131. <http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/mod/aztecs1.asp>

The second day in the city, Cortés, along with several of his officers and his interpreter, La Malinche, climbed with Montezuma to the top of the largest pyramid-temple. One officer described the scene:<sup>1</sup>

Cortés turned to Montezuma, and said to him, through our interpreter, Doña Marina (La Malinche): "Your majesty is truly a great monarch, and you deserve to be still greater! It has been a real delight to us to view all your cities. I have now one favor to beg of you. Will you allow us to see your gods and their images?"

Montezuma answered that he must first consult his chief priests. He talked to them briefly, then we were led into a kind of small tower, with one room. There we saw two pedestals resembling altars, decked with coverings of extreme beauty. On each of these pedestals stood a gigantic, fat-looking figure. The one on the right was a figure of the god of war, Huitzilopochtli. This idol had a very broad face, with distorted and furious-looking eyes, and was covered all over with jewels, gold, and pearls. Large serpents, also covered with gold and precious stones, wound round the body of this monster, which held in one hand a bow, and in the other a bunch of arrows. Another small idol which stood by its side, representing its page, carried this monster's short spear, and its golden shield studded with precious stones. Around Huitzilopochtli's neck were figures representing human faces and hearts made of gold and silver, and decorated with blue stones. In front of him stood several perfuming pans with copal, the incense of the country. The hearts of three Indians, who had that day been slaughtered, were now being burnt in front of the idol as an offering. Every wall of this chapel and the whole floor had become almost black with human blood, and the stench was horrible.

On the left stood another figure of the same size as Huitzilopochtli. Its face was very much like that of a bear, its shining eyes were made of *tetzcat* [*polished black stone*], the looking-glass of the country. This idol, like its brother Huitzilopochtli, was completely covered with precious stones, and was called *Tetzcatlipuca*. This was the god of hell, and the souls of the dead Mexicans stood under him. A circle of figures wound round its body, resembling small devils with serpents' tails. The walls and floor around this idol were also smeared with blood, and the stench was worse than in a Spanish slaughter-house. Five human hearts had that day been sacrificed to him. On the very top of this temple stood another chapel, the woodwork of which was uncommonly well finished, and richly carved. In this chapel there was also another idol, half man and half lizard, completely covered with precious stones; half of this figure was hidden from view. We were told that the hidden half was covered with the seeds of every plant of this earth, for this was the god of the seeds and fruits: I have, however, forgotten its name, but note that here also everything was smeared with blood, and the stench so offensive that we could not have stayed there much longer.

(Continued)

---

<sup>1</sup>Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, Tr. John Ingham Lockhart, 1844: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/32474/32474-h/32474-h.htm> pp. 239-41

Our commander said, smilingly, to Montezuma: "You are powerful and wise. I would think that you would have discovered by now that these idols are not gods, but evil spirits, called devils. To convince you of this, and to show this truth to your priests, let me raise a cross on the top of this temple. In the chapel where Huitzilopochtli and Tetzcatlipuca stand, give us a small space that I may place there the image of the holy Virgin. Then you will see that terror will seize these idols that have fooled you so long."

Montezuma knew what the image of the Virgin Mary was, yet he was very much displeased with Cortés' offer. He replied to the interpreter, in front of two priests, who were also obviously very angry, "Malinche, if I knew you were going to use such offensive language, I wouldn't have shown you my gods. We believe these are good gods. They preserve our lives, give us nourishment, water, and good harvests, good crop-growing weather, and victory whenever we pray to them. So we give them prayers and sacrifices. Do not say another word against the deep respect we give these gods!"

As soon as Cortés heard these words and perceived the great feeling with which they were said, he said nothing in return, but merely remarked to the monarch with a cheerful smile: "It is time for us both to leave here." To which Montezuma answered that he would not have Cortés stay any longer, but he himself needed to stay some time to atone to his gods by prayer and sacrifice for having committed great offenses, by allowing us to climb the great temple, and permitting the gods to be insulted.



Artist's re-creation of Tenochtitlán temple area, based on accounts and archaeology.  
<http://www.historyfiles.co.uk/KingListsAmericas/CentralAztecEmperors.htm>

***Hypothesize: What effect would an extended drought have on Aztec religious patterns?***

Learning that natives had attacked Veracruz, Cortés retaliated by imprisoning Montezuma and forcing him to pledge allegiance to the Spanish crown. After receiving a sizable ransom from Montezuma's subjects, Cortés allowed Montezuma to retake his throne, but only as a puppet ruler.

Cortés had just managed to gain control in Tenochtitlán when he received word that Velázquez had sent another officer and explorer, Pánfilo de Narváez, to arrest him for disobedience. Leaving a force of 80 Spaniards and a few hundred Indian allies to defend Tenochtitlán, Cortés and the rest of his men rushed to the coast to deal with Narváez, whom he defeated and captured (May 27, 1520).

Cortés wasn't gone long, but by the time he returned to Tenochtitlán the city had rebelled. The man he'd left in charge, Pedro de Alvarado, had made trouble. The natives called Alvarado "the Sun" because his blonde hair and beard reminded them of their sun god. A native remembers the events in this account:<sup>1</sup>

During this time, the people asked Montezuma how they should celebrate their god's fiesta. He said: "Dress him in all his finery, in all his sacred ornaments."

During this same time, the Sun [*Pedro de Alvarado*] commanded that Montezuma and Itzcohuatzin, the military chief of Tlatelolco, be made prisoners. The Spaniards hanged a chief from Acolhuacan named Nezahualquentzin. They also murdered the king of Nauhtla, Cohualpopocatzin, by wounding him with arrows and then burning him alive.

For this reason, our warriors were on guard at the Eagle Gate. The sentries from Tenochtitlan stood at one side of the gate, and the sentries from Tlatelolco at the other. But messengers came to tell them to dress the figure of Huitzilopochtli. They left their posts and went to dress him in his sacred finery, his ornaments and his paper clothing.

When this had been done, the worshipers began to sing their songs. That is how they celebrated the first day of the fiesta. On the second day they began to sing again, but without warning they were all put to death. The dancers and singers were completely unarmed. They brought only their embroidered cloaks, their turquoises, their lip plugs, their necklaces, their clusters of heron feathers, their trinkets made of deer hooves. Those who played the drums, the old men, had brought their gourds of snuff and their instruments.

The Spaniards attacked the musicians first, slashing at their hands and faces until they had killed all of them. The singers, and even the spectators were killed. This slaughter in the Sacred Patio went on for three hours. Then the Spaniards burst into the rooms of the temple to kill the others: those who were carrying water, or bringing fodder for the horses, or grinding meal, or sweeping, or standing watch over this work.

(Continued)

---

<sup>1</sup> Miguel LeonPortilla, ed., *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), pp. 6466, 129131. <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/aztecs1.asp>

The king Montezuma, who was accompanied by Itzcohuatzin and by those who had brought food for the Spaniards, protested: "Our lords, that is enough! What are you doing? These people are not carrying shields or weapons. Our lords, they are completely unarmed!" The Sun had treacherously murdered our people on the twentieth day after the captain left for the coast. We allowed the captain to return to the city in peace. But on the following day we attacked him with all our might, and that was the beginning of the war.

The citizens were so angry at Alvarado's actions, they even stoned Montezuma when he tried to calm the crowd. He died a few days later. Cortés and his men fought to regain control, but the Spaniards were forced to retreat from the city in late June 1520. Although Cortés won the last battle, on the plains of Otumba on July 7, he had too few men left to mount an offensive and was forced to retreat into the province of Tlaxcala.

In a letter to the King back in Europe (October 30, 1520), Cortés described his action after he gained some control, before being forced to retreat:<sup>1</sup>

I pulled the idols from their pedestals, and threw them down the steps of the temple. I purified the chapels in which they had stood, as they were all polluted with human blood, shed in the sacrifices.

In the place of these I put images of Our Lady and the Saints, which excited much feeling in Montezuma and the inhabitants. They objected, saying that if people throughout the country knew what I did, they would rise in rebellion against me. The people believed that their idols gave them everything good, and if they permitted the idols to be abused, the gods would be angry and would withhold their gifts. The people wouldn't be given the fruits of the earth and would die from famine.

I answered, through the interpreters, that they were deceived in expecting any favors from idols, the work of their own hands, formed of unclean things; and that they must learn there was but one God, the universal Lord of all, who had created the heavens and earth, and all things else, and had made them and us; that He was without beginning and immortal, and they were bound to adore and believe Him, and no other creature or thing.

...I forbade them sacrificing human beings to their idols as they had been accustomed to do; because, besides being evil in the sight of God, your sacred Majesty had prohibited it by law, and commanded to put to death whoever should take the life of another. From that time, they stopped this evil, and during the entire time I lived in that city, they were never seen to kill or sacrifice a human being.

---

<sup>1</sup> Oliver J. Thatcher, ed., *The Library of Original Sources* (Milwaukee: University Research Extension Co., 1907), Vol. V: 9th to 16th Centuries, pp. 317-326. Second Letter to Charles V, 1520  
<http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/mod/1520cortes.asp>

Cortés spent the next several months reorganizing his remaining forces and recruiting reinforcements from other Spanish settlements in the West Indies. He began marching on Tenochtitlán in December, and, in May 1521, his army of 1,000 Spaniards and thousands of Indians attacked the city. The Aztecs surrendered on August 13, and by the end of the year, Cortés was in firm control of the former Aztec Empire.

***The Spanish conquerors (“Conquistadores”) ended up destroying most of the major patterns of action, beliefs and values of the Aztecs and other Native Americans.***

***Do you believe this was justified? Give reasons for your answer.***

## Follow-Up: Ethics

“Ethics” is the branch of philosophy that deals with what’s right and wrong. “Ethical behavior” is action considered right. Shared ideas about “ethical” actions are *values*—ideas associated with strong emotions. Many of the instances of aroused emotions you’ve been investigating are related to values—shared ideas about ethics.

The Aztecs believed that (1) human sacrifices were owed to the gods, (2) being chosen for sacrifice was an honor for a captive, and (3) the sacrifices brought benefits to the people from the gods. In their view, human sacrifice was right—“ethical.”

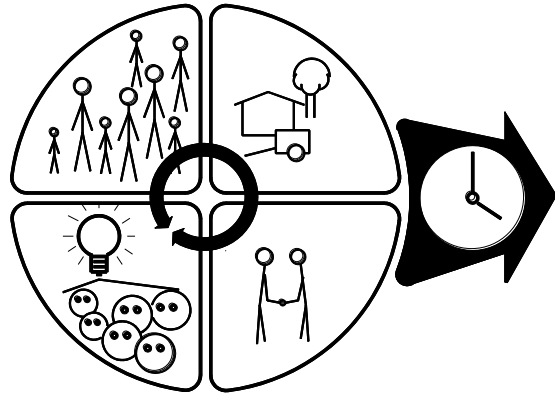
Human sacrifice is now considered unethical by people in all civilized societies. Most would agree that Cortés was right to stop it, and that there’s a set of ethical rules that apply to everyone, everywhere on earth.

Most or all societies, past and present, have the rule “do not kill,” but interpretation of the rule has varied. Here are some of them:

- Do not kill, except when necessary to save your life or the lives of those in your group.
- Do not kill, except those who disrespect or refuse to accept your ideas or religion.
- Do not kill, except for revenge against groups who have killed those in your group.
- Do not kill, except to punish people who have done extremely evil acts.
- Do not kill, except leaders of groups who have harmed or terrorized you.
- Do not kill, except to prevent outsiders from taking control of you and your country.
- Do not kill, except those who might threaten you in the future.
- Do not kill, even if NOT killing may lead to your own death or the death of those around you.

***Discuss these interpretations. Which do you consider ethical?***

***Is there a way to find out the ultimate truth about which actions are ethical, and which are unethical? If so, how? Record your thoughts and conclusions in your journal.***



### **For Teacher/Mentor—Overview:**

This unit focuses on the Aztecs and their interactions with the Spanish Conquistadors that invaded their country. The major elements of Aztec society and culture were inherited from earlier societies of Central America—Olmec, Maya, and Toltec. All of these societies built monumental sacred complexes, created massive stone sculptures, played ball games in teams on stone courts, drank chocolate (unsweetened and bitter), and prayed and made sacrifices, including human sacrifices, to animal gods. Indian corn—maize—was the main food staple for all.

These Native American civilizations were advanced in many respects. The complex hieroglyphics of Mayan writing, recently decoded, formed a fully-functional writing system—anything they could say, they could express in writing. Their numbering system was equally advanced. The Mayan calendar, with its interlocking cycles, was slightly more accurate in compensating for the actual seasonal duration of a year than the one the world uses now.

Time and space limitations have not permitted inclusion of primary source descriptions of the Aztec city of Tenochtitlán, but the links provided in the footnotes to the account by Diaz (p. 9) and the letter of Cortés (p. 12) provide access to descriptions by the Conquistadores. The city was, in many respects, an amazing accomplishment, constructed in the shallow waters of a saline lake, linked to the shore with causeways, with canals that allowed access to all parts of the city via canoe, fresh water brought into the city through large pipes, marketplaces for food and goods, and much more.

Missing from the Mesoamerican setting were horses or other beasts that could be used for transport of people and freight. Probably for this reason, the wheel (although seen on a few toys) was unknown as a practical device. The lack of appropriate draft animals was a major limitation, or the “New World” civilizations may have achieved even greater levels of development.

Another inhibiting factor in the development of these civilizations may have been human sacrifice. Those victims were generally captives from surrounding tribal groups, which led to a continual low-level state of war with or domination of these groups, to maintain the supply of captives. For example, the Aztecs and the Cholutecas (from Cholula) had been at war for some 75 years when the Spanish arrived. The Aztecs were hated by surrounding groups, and some of them readily joined in the Spanish campaign, in the hope that Aztec power would be thwarted—not a vain hope, as it turned out.

As stated on page 2, the reasons for the collapse of earlier Mesoamerican societies are not known for sure, but are probably related to climate variations that brought drought and famine. Complex civilizations with large cities are vulnerable to disruption of the systems that grow and distribute food. This is one reason why religious belief systems become so important in some societies—the gods that are seen as keeping the rains coming reliably must be kept satisfied with sacrifices. If the rain stops (or other major problems occur), the immediate reaction is to increase the sacrifices. If this fails to work for any extended period, the inhabitants can lose faith in the gods, the priests that serve them, and the entire hierarchy, beginning the collapse of all the complex elements of city life.

When people from dissimilar societies meet, the differences almost always cause problems for one or both. This is particularly true when deep-seated values are

incompatible. Those differences between the Aztec and Spanish were extreme, particularly in elements of religion, intensely important to both groups.

**Note:** There is some scholarly debate revolving around the extent that Spanish views may have affected the native accounts given here, since many of them were collected by Spanish priests many years after the events occurred. For example, some have questioned the extent to which Montezuma (and other natives) believed the arriving Spanish were gods, and the nature of these beliefs.<sup>1</sup> We have chosen in this unit to treat the accounts in the unit as valid, to avoid complexity for learners. (Note that these sources do not indicate that Cortés was seen as the return of Quetzalcoatl, as incorrectly stated in many textbooks. See note on Quetzalcoatl on page 17.)

#### Optional Introduction:

The unit “[Columbus and the Natives, 1492-1493](#)” which was generated as a supplement to our American history course materials, may be used prior to this unit, to give some background for Spanish actions in the New World.

#### *Investigation: Aroused Emotions*

Learners will benefit from having some understanding of the whole story before they begin their analysis. If possible, have them read over all the historical data in the unit before beginning their analysis. (Or, perhaps, read it to them.)

The learner’s own first emotional reaction will likely be to the sacrifice of the captives for the benefit of the early messengers, described in the first data box. However, we’ve asked learners to identify aroused emotions of natives and Spanish—not their own reactions.

They may miss the first instance of aroused emotion described in the data—Montezuma’s terrified response when he heard from those first messengers he sent to meet the strangers. If necessary, point it out so it won’t be skipped.

Identification, by learners, of the **reasons** for Montezuma’s terror is worth quite a bit of discussion and digging on their part, and is a good introduction to the analysis to be done throughout the unit. One thing helpful is for learners, in dealing with this question, is to attempt to view the situation from the point of view of Montezuma. Getting inside his head, to grasp his intense belief, fear and respect for the Aztec gods, is an exercise in a difficult form of cross-cultural empathy. Clues to his mental state are in the account, but most of this information is later in the unit, such as the data on Page 8, when Montezuma comes face-to-face with the Spanish, whom he still considers to be gods.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, learners will benefit from revisiting and perhaps revising earlier conclusions after analyzing sources given later in the unit. If they get hung up at any point, suggest they move on to additional data, and come back later to refine their conclusions.

---

<sup>1</sup> Townsend, Camilla. "Burying the White Gods: New Perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico," *American Historical Review* (June 2003) <http://www.studythepast.com/buryingthewhitegods.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Maybe. See earlier note. But the Spaniards had what seemed to be supernatural powers, so “gods” probably wasn’t far off the mark.

The second occasion of aroused emotion in the sources was the reaction of the Spanish soldiers when two captives were sacrificed in front of them by the Aztec messengers. Their response was comparable to the response people would have today: They found the sacrifice abhorrent.

The Aztecs no doubt found the Spanish reaction unexplainable and confusing. After all, didn't gods love to feed on human blood?

Reasons given by learners for the Spanish reaction to the slaughter of the captives is likely to be superficial at first, with statements like "Because it was wrong." Some probing questions will likely be necessary, e.g.:

"Obviously, the Aztecs did not think human sacrifice was wrong. So why did the Spanish think it was wrong?"

Answers like "Because it was against their religion," will require further probing.

"The Spanish killed many natives as they advanced toward the Aztec capital. Did they think this killing was wrong? Was this against their religion?"

Generating a precise reason for the Spanish emotional reaction won't be easy.

The remaining analysis of the data should proceed in the same way. Make sure the Spanish actions that cause aroused feelings in the natives are analyzed in the same depth as instances of aroused feelings of the Conquistadors.

**Note:** Quetzalcoatl (feathered serpent), whose cult was centered in Cholula, had been an important Mesoamerican deity for over a thousand years. Visitors to Chichen Itza, for example, will see many carved depictions of this god, called Kukulcán by the Yucatec Maya. This "rattlesnake with feathers" is generally depicted coming down from a height, with its mouth at the bottom. Apparently Quetzalcoatl was a storm god, a symbolic depiction of lightning, which could strike like a rattlesnake, bringing fire and death,



but also bringing rain for crops to sustain life. The feathers were a realistic element of the appearance of lightning, and of course feathers were associated with flying through the sky. This conclusion about the nature of the god is supported by the expectation of the Cholultecas that their god would bring thunder and fire from the sky, along with deluges of water to drown their enemy (page 6).

### **Another Spanish force:**

A postscript to this account of the interaction between the Spanish and the Aztecs, from Jared Diamond's bestseller, *Guns, Germs and Steel*:<sup>1</sup>

“That Cortés reached the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán, escaped with the loss of “only” two-thirds of his force, and managed to fight his way back to the coast demonstrates both Spanish military advantages and the initial naiveté of the Aztecs. But when Cortés's next onslaught came, the Aztecs were no longer naïve and fought street by street with the utmost tenacity. What gave Spaniards a decisive advantage was smallpox, which reached Mexico in 1520 with one infected slave arriving from Spanish Cuba. The resulting epidemic proceeded to kill nearly half of the Aztecs, including Emperor Cuitaláhuac. Aztec survivors were demoralized by the mysterious illness that killed Indians and spared Spaniards, as if advertising the Spaniards' invincibility. By 1618, Mexico's initial population of about 20 million had plummeted to about 1.6 million.”

The native population, never exposed to smallpox, lacked the genetic resistance inherited by Europeans. This resistance evolved over centuries of exposure to the disease.

### **Follow-Up: Ethics**

This is a natural extension to the previous investigation. One way to proceed is to have learners identify present-day examples when each of the “interpretations” of “Do not kill...” are used—beheading of captives by terrorists in the Mideast, gang shootings, capital punishment, bombing from airplanes and drones, etc.

We believe the principles of ultimate ethical judgement grow out of (1) considering every human to be worthy of conserving, and (2) some version of the “golden rule”—treating all others as one would wish or expect to be treated.

Optional follow-on investigation:

The opening investigation in our course/handbook *Investigating American History*, at <http://www.marionbrady.com/AHH.asp>, is “Planning a Spanish Town in America.” This activity has been used in hundreds of classrooms over the years, with outstanding results.

(HLB) March 2016, above Diamond quote added September 2025

---

<sup>1</sup> Diamond, Jared, *Guns, Germs and Steel; The Fates of Human Societies*, (New York, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1999, 1997) pp. 203-4