

# Mexico; beyond *Día de Muertos*, tacos and sombreros

This Month we are excited to explore the people and traditions behind the world-famous *Día de Muertos* celebrations. What are the origins of this festival? And what else can we learn about the indigenous peoples of Mexico?

## CULTURAL APPROPRIATION OR CULTURAL APPRECIATION?

Perhaps the symbol of the *Día de Muertos* celebrations that is most instantly recognisable is the image of the face-painted Catrina skull. Some people argue that the widespread and commercialised\* use of this amounts to cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation is when a dominant group takes customs, usually aesthetics (concerned with appearance) from a less dominant group, without making any attempt to understand properly the culture that this imagery represents. Cultural appreciation, on the other hand, is when someone seeks to understand and learn about another culture.

\*when products are made with no connection to the culture to which they belong: for example, *Día de Muertos* costumes during Halloween. These products use images associated with the traditions of *Día de Muertos* but are created **to make profit**. It is unlikely that any of this profit is invested back into Mexican communities.



An alter honoring the dead at Plaza Guerrero during *Día de Muertos* celebration in Queretaro, Mexico.



A young girl, dressed as La Catrina, takes part in the Day of the Dead festivities in Mexico City, Mexico.



A Mexican family gathers at the flower-decorated grave during the Day of the Dead festivities in Tzurumútaro, Mexico.

## DÍA DE MUERTOS IS NOT JUST MEXICAN HALLOWEEN

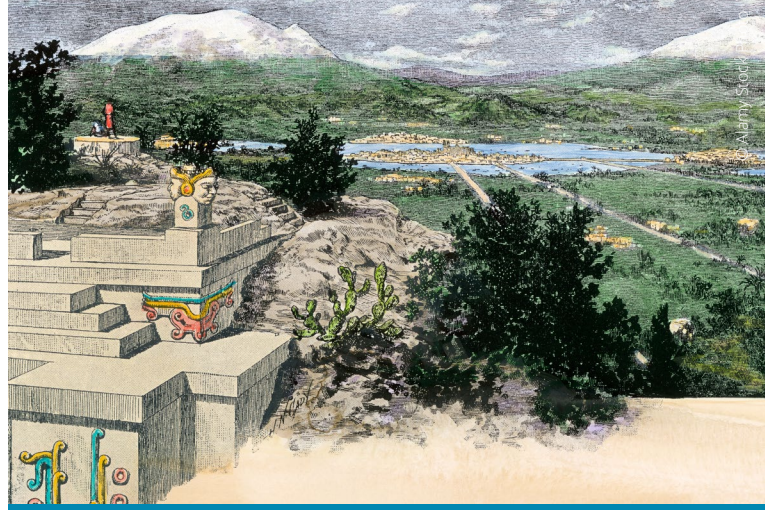
Both modern day celebrations have links to the Catholic tradition of All Saints' Day, which is why they occur around the same time, and in both celebrations the central theme is death. However, the festivities of *Día de Muertos* are for remembering and celebrating the lives of those who have passed away; unlike Halloween it is not scary or frightening. For the Aztec people and those who celebrate *Día de Muertos* today, death is part of the journey of life, and deceased family and friends can still be contacted in the afterlife. During *Día de Muertos*, some families place trails of bright orange marigold flowers, leading from graves to the families' homes, to create a safe path for the dead to visit home during the celebrations.



## SPANISH COLONISATION

Before the Spanish invaded Mexico, the Aztecs were thriving socially, intellectually, and artistically. Yet it can be difficult to understand fully who the Aztecs were and what they believed, as much of the information we have from that time was written by Spanish colonisers, who may have been biased in their accounts and could only create records in their role as observers. There is evidence that indigenous peoples authored many codices, but the Spanish destroyed most of them in their attempt to eradicate ancient beliefs.

In order to establish control over the Aztec people and the land, the colonisers used brutal tactics, many Aztecs died and this signalled the end of the Aztec Empire. In addition, 80% of the Aztec population was killed by smallpox, brought to Mexico by the Spanish. It was one of the world's largest epidemics and was responsible for the majority of Aztec deaths. The Spanish colonisers forced the survivors to take on their language and religion, crushing Aztec culture in the process. However, we can still see many aspects of Aztec tradition in Mexican culture today, including *Día de Muertos*.



Tenochtitlan, Mexico, as it may have looked under the Aztecs in Lake Xochimilco. Hand-colored woodcut.



Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire (1519-1521). Battle of Otumba, 1520. Engraving, 1875. This engraving was created more than 300 years after the colonisation of the Americas by a European artist and does not reflect current understanding of historical events.

What elements of the colonial narrative do you see in this picture? Why would the artist aim to display events this way? What about the title - would you name it something different?

## THE COLONIAL NARRATIVE

You may have learned about the Aztecs of Mexico before. If so, you may know that they are well known for carrying out human sacrifices. Historian Hugh Thomas suggests why this aspect is often the first thing we learn about the Aztecs:

“When looking back at the destruction of the Aztec Empire and the conquest of other indigenous peoples in the Americas, European colonisers have tried to justify the violence by denouncing indigenous communities’ brutal acts of human sacrifice and murder. In the case of the Aztecs, the Spanish condemned how priests tore out the hearts of prisoners and slaves and wore the skins of their victims inside out.”

Yet historians say that the extent of the violence by the Spanish colonisers against the indigenous people, like the Aztecs, was much bloodier and far more deadly. Thomas found a letter written by a Spaniard in Mexico, in which he describes how travelling from Tenochtitlán to Veracruz was like going from hell to heaven. He described a city in flames, Aztecs fleeing their ruined homes and streets lined with unburied bodies.

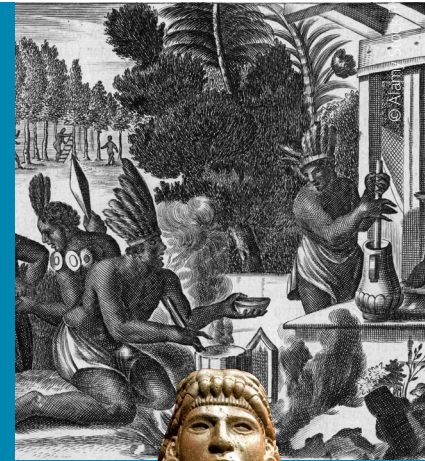


## NAHUATL

Pre-colonisation, the Aztec language, Nahuatl, was the most widely spoken language in Mexico. Many Nahuatl words found their way into Spanish, and later English as well, including **chile** or **chili**, **avocado**, **chocolate**, **coyote**, **peyote**, **guacamole**, **ocelot** and **mescal**.

The Aztecs were Nahua people and they spoke Nahuatl. Today there are still many Nahua indigenous groups living in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador.

European interpretation of Aztecs preparing a beverage (possibly chocolate or coffee).  
Date: circa 1520  
What aspects of the colonial narrative could be present in this picture? What could be inaccurate? What is missing?



Aztec sculpture 1400-1520  
Quetzalcoatl, Mexican.



## 5 Interesting Facts about the Aztecs and their Nahua culture

Due to the way that historical records about indigenous civilizations were created by the colonisers, combined with the fact that these same colonisers destroyed much of the ancient codices created by the Aztecs and other Nahua people, it can be difficult to truly understand who they were and how they lived. Because of this, many historical accounts contradict themselves, but as time goes on, historians are discovering new things about this ancient society that seem to tell a different story. As well as this different relationship with death, the Aztec people and their descendants have other ways of seeing the world and understanding life that may be surprising.

- **Powerful women:** contrary to what historians initially believed about Aztec culture, it was not a male-dominated society. In fact, women enjoyed many powerful positions, including priesthood. This was at least 700 years before women in England won the right to vote.
- **Social mobility** – whilst it is generally understood that Aztec society was a structured hierarchy, upwards and downwards social mobility was extremely common. Society actively encouraged upwards mobilisation in the fields of education, trading, fighting and spiritual commitment at the same time, just because you were born a noble it did not guarantee you a high position in society.
- **Elders:** *tlamatque* are wise elders of the community who pass on life education and values to the next generations, this is a tradition that has continued to this day. *Tlamatque* pass on the importance of respect for Mother Earth, spirits, elders and ancestors.
- **Respect for Nature** - connection to Mother Earth is paramount in Nahua culture: the Nahua people believe mountains are sacred and they are seen as living beings with names.
- **Collectivism** - At the heart of Nahua culture is the sense of community, rather than that of the individual.



Nahua midwife, Josefina Amable, monitors the heartbeat of mother-to-be Michaela Ramirez's baby during a routine home visit outside Cuetzalan, Mexico, October 24, 2006.

*What similarities and differences do you recognise compared with British culture or other cultures you know? What did you find the most interesting/surprising?*



## NAHUA POETRY

Martín Tonalmeyotl is a Nahuatl poet who has dedicated his life to the resurgence of his native language, Nahuatl. Martín lives in Guerrero, Mexico. He has worked as a university professor, teaching a new generation of Nahuatl speakers. He also works as a fiction writer, translator, radio host and columnist. Here is a poem he wrote about his language.

**[Read the poem in English.](#)** How does it make you feel? What are the key themes? What linguistic features does Tonalmeyotl use to convey his message? Then read the poem in Nahuatl and Spanish. What do you notice about the rhythms and sounds in the different languages? Do you notice any similarities?

**[You can listen to Martín reading his other poem Amo xchia in Nahuatl.](#)**

## MEXICAN PRESIDENT APOLOGISES TO THE MAYAN PEOPLE

Indigenous people in Mexico, like the Nahuatl, still face structural, systemic and historic forms of discrimination every day. This means that indigenous communities in Mexico are much more likely to live in poverty than the rest of the Mexican population.

The Maya are another indigenous community in Mexico. They also faced oppression at the hands of the Spanish colonisers. In 2021 the president of Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, travelled to the Mayan state of Yucatán to formally apologise for the abuses committed against them during the 500 years since the Spanish conquest. This was a symbolic event as no other Mexican president has ever made a similar gesture. However, when the president arrived there was a crowd of protestors and many accused him of political opportunism, given that elections were just around the corner. As the president was addressing the crowd inside the event and pledging to listen to the voices of the Maya, the shouts of the protestors outside could, somewhat paradoxically, be heard in the background.

Mayan Temple  
pyramid of Kukulcan  
- Chichen Itza,  
Yucatan, Mexico.



## STATUES

Following the upsurge in support for the global Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, indigenous rights activists across the US and Latin America pulled down statues of Christopher Columbus, viewing him as a symbol of colonialism and oppression. In Mexico City, where the thriving Aztec city of Tenochtitlán stood previously, the Columbus statue was defaced with paint. Mexican authorities soon removed the statue in recognition of the will of the people. When Columbus was removed, feminist activists installed a figure of a woman with her fist raised in defiance. They said this is “dedicated to those who throughout the country have faced violence, repression and re-victimization against injustices...the space is dedicated to women who are looking for their disappeared relatives, to the mothers of victims of femicide and their daughters, to the defenders of the territory, to Afro-Mexican women, to indigenous women and to all women who with their struggles have built our history.” The plinth is currently empty, but the Mayor of Mexico City has said that it will be replaced with a replica of an ancient indigenous statue called *Young Woman of Amajac*, which will stand tall at six metres. The discovery of the original female statue in January 2021 supports increasing understanding around the importance of the role of women in the social and political life of historic indigenous civilisations.

Activists unveil an anti-monument dedicated to “women who fight”, where a statue of Christopher Columbus once stood, in Mexico City, Mexico September 25, 2021.





## INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE

Indigenous resistance to ongoing forms of oppression and colonialism exist in Mexico in many forms today. Indigenous rights often form a big part of the discussion about solutions to the climate crisis. Indigenous peoples' relationship with the land and resources is based on respect, protection and sustainability rather than trying to extract the most possible for the highest profit. Where indigenous people have more rights, lands, forests and animal species are protected.

Indigenous groups across the world and in Mexico, are demanding, among other things, the following:

- **Land claim:** many indigenous people have been displaced due to farming, mining or industrialisation practices. They are demanding that their claim to the land, territory and resources be recognised.
- **An end to violence:** many indigenous people, especially women, have experienced violence at the hands of the Mexican government for attempting to protect their land and culture.
- **An end to social discrimination:** indigenous people are often marginalised, living disproportionately in poverty and as second-class citizens.
- **Ancestral knowledge:** a recognition of indigenous forms of knowledge that preserve and protect Mother Earth.
- **Cultural and linguistic representation:** the teaching, learning and presence of indigenous languages and cultural traditions in modern-day Mexico.

Let's look at some examples of indigenous resistance in Mexico.



Oaxaca, Mexico - Members of the Triqui ethnic group protest displacement from their homes and violence in their region.



Mexico City, Mexico – February 21, 2020. Several people linked arms at the front of the march. Thousands of people march in protest at the one-year anniversary of the death of Samir Flores, an indigenous environmental activist who protesters say was killed by the government.



## THE ZAPATISTAS

The Zapatistas comprise an indigenous group which seeks to regain control of its lands. It has been in conflict with the Mexican government for more than 20 years, though it is currently a 'frozen conflict'. The Zapatistas have been involved in armed resistance as they say that peaceful protests and attempts to open dialogue with the government were either ignored or met with violent oppression. The Zapatistas control some territories within the state of Chiapas, where they say the people govern and the power comes from the bottom-up rather than top-down. The Zapatistas have many supporters in the West, among them the Italian football team, Inter Milan, which has donated large sums of money to their cause.

## LUPITA

Lupita is a young activist from Southern Mexico. Nine members of her family were killed in an offensive by paramilitaries to quash indigenous support for the Zapatistas. The killings are known as the Acteal Massacre, in which 45 people were killed. To this day, there has been no justice for the community.

Lupita campaigns tirelessly for the rights of her people. [You can watch a film about her work.](#) She says, "We know that everything we receive from the government is in exchange for our lands. One day they will take everything. We're done with political parties, we don't want any more. We're tired of the lies, the deception. Here's to continuing the resistance."

## SANTOS TUZ

Santos is making sure that his indigenous language is celebrated and preserved. Santos is a young student from Yucatán, who started to teach the Mayan language on TikTok. He said he learned Mayan from his grandmother and is proud of his indigenous roots. He has gained thousands of followers and thousands follow his lessons online. He said, "At first people asked me why I was teaching Mayan, that I was better off teaching English, that Mayan was useless, that the people of Yucatan didn't even understand Spanish and that made me feel very bad. They discriminated against me for teaching Mayan but there were lots of people who wanted to support me too."

[Check out his TikTok account.](#)



The Zapatista uprising in Chiapas begins. The EZLN, the indigenous resistance movement in the Mexican province of Chiapas, demands freedom, justice and democracy in Mexico. Here are female guerrilla fighters of the Zapatistas.



Zapatistas National Liberation Army (EZLN) supporters wait for the arrival of the rebel commanders at a ceremony of welcoming in a Zapatista village "Oventic", Chiapas on April 1, 2001. The rebel commanders' month long journey to the nation's Congress was hailed as a watershed event in Mexico.



Masked Zapatista rebel women walk near the village of San Jose la Esperanza, following a clash a day earlier between Zapatista supporters and army troops near Mexico's southern border with Guatemala. Chiapas, which borders Guatemala and is one of Mexico's poorest states, has been the scene of simmering tensions since the Zapatistas launched an uprising in 1994 for indigenous rights.

**Actividad: Complete the table by matching the Spanish phrase and the definitions from the boxes below.**

ENGLISH	SPANISH	DEFINITION
indigenous resistance		
reparations		
settler colony		
the struggle		
human rights		
indigenous people		
land claim		
displaced		
social marginalisation		

### SPANISH TERMS

resistencia indígena

derechos humanos

reparaciones

marginación social

desplazados

lucha

asentamiento de colonos

pueblos indígenas

reclamo de la tierra

### DEFINITION

a form of compensation for abuse or injury, usually financial

the political fight for justice

a type of colonialism that seeks to replace the original population with a new settler society

indigenous movement to reclaim lost land territories and resources

somebody who has been forcibly removed from their home, region or country

the groups of people who have ancestral links to the land, pre-colonisation

basic rights and freedoms which belong to everyone protected by laws in many cases

opposition to colonial dominance, old and new

structural inequality that results in people being excluded from society



**ACTIVIDAD: Fill in the gaps using the Spanish phrases above.  
Be careful: you only need seven!**

1. El país de México es un \_\_\_\_\_. Cuando llegaron los españoles no fueron solo para controlar el territorio y los recursos, sino que se instalaron para quedarse y vivir allí.
2. En realidad, Cristóbal Colón no 'descubrió' las Américas porque \_\_\_\_\_ ya estaban allí cuando Colón llegó para colonizar esas tierras.
3. Muchos indígenas fueron \_\_\_\_\_.
4. Todavía en México los pueblos indígenas experimentan discriminación y \_\_\_\_\_.
5. Pero hay mucha \_\_\_\_\_.
6. Luchan por sus \_\_\_\_\_: justicia por la violencia cometida contra ellos a lo largo de la historia y contra la representación de sus lenguas y culturas.
7. Para los Zapatistas, la demanda más importante es \_\_\_\_\_.

**DISCUSSION POINTS**

- If you were writing a letter to the Mexican president demanding indigenous rights; what would be your main argument?
- Can revolutionary violence ever be justified? Justify your answer.
- Why is it important that Nahuatl is taught in Mexican schools?
- What is your opinion on statues of Christopher Columbus in the Americas?
- Do you think formerly colonised nations should be paid reparations? What else could be done?
- Explain what the protesters meant by 'political opportunism' with regards to the Mexican president's apology to the Mayan people.
- Do you think that colonial artwork that is widely regarded as historically inaccurate should be used in school textbooks?

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Melina Irvine** is an MFL teacher in Bristol with six years classroom experience who has spent extended periods abroad living in Spain, France, Costa Rica and Brazil. She completed her undergraduate degree at Queen Mary University of London, then went on to study her PGCE at the University of Bristol where she is currently completing an MSc in Education. She has a keen interest in ideas around student's sense of belonging and where this intersects with mental health and wellbeing, critical thinking, equalities and social justice. She has held pastoral roles in schools and has collaborated with South Bristol Youth as an academic mentor. She is passionate about making languages education inclusive and engaging for all learners and is excited by the potential for change sparked by increased awareness and conversations around race and equality in schools. She is co-chair of the ALL Decolonise Secondary MFL Curriculum Special Interest Group alongside Lisa Panford.

Explore the rest of our resources on [diversity and inclusion](#).

