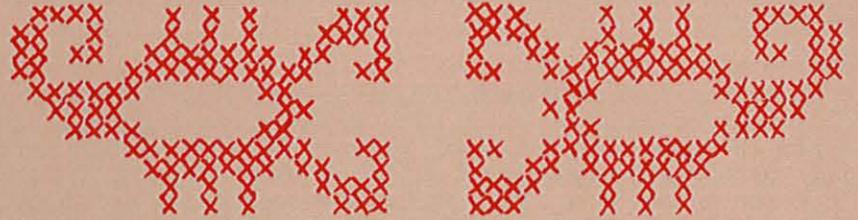




Native Mexico



June 5, 1988 through October, 1988

Like the United States, Mexico was inhabited by a wide variety of native groups when it was first contacted by Western European explorers. Many of these groups had come under the dominion of what history has labeled the Aztecs. This was a group of Nahuatl speakers centered on the island of Tenochtitlan. Although the Aztecs exacted tribute from the subjugated people and imposed their principal deities on them, they made little attempt at modifying their culture.

The rich cultural diversity present in Mexico at the time of contact was not fully appreciated by the Spaniards. They were awed by the exotic nature of the native cultures and misled by the political situation; they assumed all native culture was the same. Cortés was not an ethnographer nor was his intent to catalogue the cultures he encountered. He had entered Mexico to exploit its wealth. To that end, native groups became sources of cheap labor for the needs of the settlers and were best controlled by the imposition of the Spanish political system.

Over the course of the next several hundred years, a large population of mixed Spanish and native blood developed, known as mestizo. Yet there remain in Mexico families that have not intermarried and have remained essentially Spanish or native. These native groups have retained numerous elements of their culture which predate the early 1500s.

Under the fabric of this cultural diversity is an equally wide range in environments. Northern Mexico is characterized by vast deserts and rugged mountain ranges. The Mesa Central is more temperate and much like the climate the early explorers had known in Spain. The east coast and southern lowlands contain vast jungles characterized by a hot, humid environment. These environmental variations affected the settlement patterns of the Spanish settlers. The temperate zone was more appealing to the European explorers and thus felt the greatest outside influence. The deserts and mountains to the north and the jungles to the south were largely left alone and, as a result, groups living in these areas experienced the least amount of cultural change.

Native Mexico features three peoples from different geographic regions: the Huichol, the Nahua and the Maya. The Huichol people live in the rugged mountains to the north of Guadalajara. Their environment has helped protect them from the impact of contact. The Nahua, the present-day descendants of the Aztecs, live in the Mesa Central area and have been in contact with European influences for over 400 years. They have managed, however, to maintain their native tongue and some cultural traits. To the south, in the lowlands, are the Maya. The Maya come from an elaborate cultural tradition which had passed its florescence by the time of contact. Their geographic remoteness, the lowland jungle environment and cultural decline all contributed to the preservation of the Mayan culture: the Spanish could see no practical value in exploiting these native peoples.

Maya

The present-day Maya live primarily in the Yucatan, in an area marked by the monumental ruins left by their ancestors. The ancient Maya were master mathematicians and invented a calendar still used in the area for ritual and agricultural purposes.

The Maya practice slash-and-burn and raised field agriculture, typical of lowland areas. The heavy, lush vegetation is burned, releasing nutrients and creating a rich mulch, and crops are planted in the ashes. Fields are good for about three years, and then the areas must be abandoned and allowed to return to the wild. Maize is the most important crop.

Homes are located near a cenote or natural well, which provides water for crops and people. The house is only one room. Although the wealthy may have a structure made of masonry, most Maya live in a thatched house. A pole framework is constructed, and a roof is made of palm-leaf thatch. The walls are of slender poles, sometimes covered with plaster. The domestic unit also includes a fowl house and possibly a grainery, as well as hollowed-out logs which are elevated and used as tray-gardens.

In the house, three stones are placed to create the hearth for cooking, and a low wooden table for patting out tortillas is found next to it. There is also a larger table where a woman can stand and grind corn on a metate into a large bowl or trencher. Wooden benches, hammocks, griddles and baskets complete the listing of domestic furniture.

While the Maya are nominally Catholic, many of the old beliefs persist, particularly in reference to agriculture. Offerings are made when the field is cleared, when rain is needed, when the first plant matures and when the harvest is completed.

Nahua

Nahuatl speakers are those indigenous people of central Mexico who still speak today the language of the Aztecs. They comprise the largest native group in Mexico. Their principal habitat is the Mesa Central and the heart of the area is the Valley of Mexico, which has an elevation of 8000 feet and a temperate climate. While some groups speak only the ancient language, most Nahua are today bi-lingual. The present day Nahua must be viewed in terms of their past history, since Nahua life has been greatly impacted since the Spanish Conquest of Tenochtitlan in 1521. Aztec beliefs were integrated with Catholicism to create a new lifeway. Native economies and technology were profoundly changed by Spanish introductions from the Old World.

Maize, beans and squash remain the staple food crops, along with tomatoes and chile. Farmers work in cooperative sets of four, two growing maize and the other two planting beans and squash. Cooperative labor and crop exchange is organized by families.

Nahua settlements are typically organized around the church, situated in the central plaza or marketplace. This serves as the social, economic and religious heart of the village. Surrounding the plaza are the barrios, with their own chapels and patron saints. Family homes are usually single rooms. Walls are made of cane, with gaps between the uprights filled with mud and dried grass. Below the thatched roofs the Nahua store food and other valuables. Furniture is minimal, and most homes also have associated cooking sheds and corrals. In some areas, the Nahua have replaced the jacal walls with adobe brick, stone, or wood.

Nahua religion is a mix of old and new beliefs. Of great importance is the local patron saint, and families compete to contribute to the fiestas asking the supernatural to insure the harvest. In Nahua life, the need of the community supercedes the wants of the individual, and prestige is associated with communal cooperation.

Huichol

The Huichol people live in the states of Nayarit and Jalisco in Mexico, high in the Sierra Madre Occidental. Their land is so remote that they were not conquered and Christianized until 1722 and, in fact, their culture remains intact even today. Huichol life is organized around a never-ending cycle of a symbolic, mystical religious belief system which requires many reenactments. Plant and animal life has great significance and most practical as well as decorative items in the Huichol world have reference to their religion.

The origins of the Huichol are unclear, but their resistance to acculturation suggests that they follow an old traditional way of life. Families practice seasonal maize agriculture, and supplement their diet with a variety of gathered foods and hunted meats: deer, peccary and iguana. Some barnyard animals are also kept.

The Huichol prefer to live outdoors, and even cook and sleep outside the homes whenever possible. As a result, houses are small, and furniture is scarce. A home also included a maize crib, cooking arbor, oratory, animal corral and swept yard (where most activities take place). Communities consist of 1 to 12 homes named and identified by the elder's name, and are located about 15 minutes' walk apart.

Huichol religion is the best known aspect of their culture. The people ritually "hunt" peyote and then ingest the drug which leads all Huichol on the path of knowledge and of completion. Verbal prayers, prayer arrows, "god's eyes", cotton, gourd bowls, yarn-and-bead pictures and food and drink offerings are all used to help in communicating with the supernatural spirits.

Suggested Readings

Berrin, Kathleen (editor)

1978 *Art of the Huichol Indians*. Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, Harry Abrams, New York.

Cordry, Donald and Dorothy

1968 *Mexican Indian Costumes*. University of Texas, Austin.

Wauchope, Robert (general editor) and Evon Z. Vogt (volume editor)

1969 *Handbook of Middle American Indians, Volumes 7 and 8, Ethnology*. University of Texas, Austin.

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