

# Aztec Creation Myth

## The Legend of the Fifth Sun



The Aztec creation myth which tells how the world originated is called the Legend of the Fifth Sun. Several different versions of this myth exist because the stories were originally passed down by oral tradition, and because the Aztecs adopted and modified gods and myths from other tribes.

The world of the Aztecs at the time of the Spanish colonization

was the fifth era of a cycle of creation and destruction. They believed their world had been created and destroyed four times before, and the current age, the "fifth sun", would also end in violence at the end of the calendrical cycle. During each of the four previous cycles, different gods first governed the earth through a dominant element, and then destroyed it. These worlds were called suns.

### In the Beginning...

In the beginning, according to Aztec mythology, the creator couple Tonacacihuatl and Tonacateuctli (or the god Omoteotl, who was both male and female) gave birth to four sons, the Tezcatlipocas of the East, North, South and West.

After 600 years, the sons began to create the universe, including the creation of cosmic time, called "suns". These gods eventually created the world and all the other deities.

After the world was created, the gods gave light to humans, but in order to do this, one of the gods had to sacrifice himself by leaping into a fire. Each subsequent sun was created by the sacrifice of at least one of the gods, and a key element of the story, like that of all Aztec culture, is sacrifice to begin renewal.

### Four Cycles

The first god to sacrifice himself was Tezcatlipoca, who leapt into the fire and became the **First Sun**, called "4 Tiger". This period was inhabited by giants who ate only acorns;

and it came to an end when the giants were devoured by jaguars. The world lasted 676 years, or 13 52-year cycles according to the pan-Mesoamerican calendar.

The **Second Sun**, or "4-Wind" sun, was governed by Quetzalcoatl (also known as the White Tezcatlipoca), and the earth was populated by humans who ate only piñon nuts. Tezcatlipoca wanted to be sun, and turned himself into a tiger and threw Quetzalcoatl off his throne. This world came to an end through catastrophic hurricanes and floods. The few survivors fled to the top of the trees and were transformed into monkeys. This world also lasted 676 years.

The **Third Sun**, or "4-Rain" Sun, was dominated by water: its ruling deity was the rain god Tlaloc and its people ate seeds that grew in the water. This world came to an end when the god Quetzalcoatl made it rain fire and ashes. The survivors became turkeys, butterflies or dogs. Turkeys are called "pipil-pipil" in the Aztec language, meaning "child" or "prince". This world ended in 7 cycles, or 364 years.

The **Fourth Sun**, the "4-Water" sun, was governed by the goddess Chalchiuthlicue, sister and wife of Tlaloc. The people ate maize. A great flood marked the end of this world and all the people were transformed into fish. 4 Water lasted for 676 years.

### **Creating the Fifth Sun**

At the end of the fourth sun, the gods gathered at Teotihuacan to decide who had to sacrifice him/herself in order for the new world to begin. The god Huehuetéotl, the old fire god, started a sacrificial bonfire, but none of the most important gods wanted to jump into the flames. The rich and proud god Tecuciztecatl "Lord of the Snails" hesitated and the humble and poor Nanahuatzin "the Pimpily or Scabby one" leapt into the flames and became the new sun.

Tecuciztecatl jumped in after him and became a second sun. The gods realized that two suns would overwhelm the world, so they threw a rabbit at Tecuciztecatl, and it became the moon--you can still see the rabbit in the moon today. The two celestial bodies were set in motion by Ehecatl, the god of the wind, who fiercely and violently blew the sun into motion.

### **The Fifth Sun**

The **Fifth Sun** (4-Movement) was ruled by Tonatiuh, the sun god. This fifth sun was characterized by the sign Ollin, which means movement. According to Aztec beliefs, this indicated that this world would come to an end through earthquakes.

The Aztecs considered themselves "the People of the Sun" and therefore their duty was to nourish the Sun god through blood offerings and sacrifices. Failure to do this would cause the end of their world and the disappearance of the sun from the sky.

A version of this myth is recorded on the famous Aztec Calendar Stone, a colossal stone sculpture whose images referred to one version of this creation tale linked to Aztec history.

### **Mythic Interpretation**

The Five Suns and its implications were so deeply ingrained in Aztec society and ritual it is difficult to separate them. To understand the Five Suns, one must understand several aspects of Aztec society, including views of time, space, war, rulership, and even recreation.

Some people may wonder why the Aztecs chose to limit the cosmos to five eras. Quite simply, five was a sacred number based on the five directions. These directions were the four cardinal points plus the center. The center was understood to be the star cluster known as the Pleiades. Like many ancient cultures, the Aztecs were sky watchers and developed a calendar based on the observations they made. The world survived in fifty-two year cycles, and the "world was known to be safe from destruction at any point within the calendar round; it was only at the expiration on one set, before the succeeding one began, that the world was vulnerable."

So at the end of this fifty two year period, the Aztecs performed a sacred ceremony. This ritual involved watching the movement of the stars until midnight. At this time, if the Pleiades had reached the zenith, or highest point in the sky, the world was safe and would continue for another fifty two years. Otherwise, demons would come down from the heavens and devour the people.

When the Pleiades crossed the meridian and the life of the world was secure, the priests would perform a human sacrifice. Preferably, the victim would need to be a captured general or other important prisoner of war. The victim had his chest cut open and heart removed. The organ was then burned and a new fire was kindled in the chest cavity. Swift runners would then light torches from this fire and take the new fire across the land, using it to start fires for the people of the community. The body of the victim would be burned along with a bundle of fifty-two sticks.

A great deal of Aztec mythology revolves around the role and worship of the sun. Such worship is not surprising given the climate the Aztecs lived in. To an extent, all ancient cultures had some reverence towards the sun, especially in colder climates where the sun's life giving powers could be in short supply for months at a time. These cultures tended to view the sun more mercifully. However, in warmer climates the sun took on a different role. These areas rarely experienced a lack of the sun's heat, but rather an abundance of it. Life became more dangerous during the warmest parts of the year, and precautions would need to be taken in order to avoid more mundane dangers like heat exhaustion and stroke. But humans were not the only life forms to suffer during period

of intense heat. There was also damage done to vegetation. A dry season could spell disaster for a community if the sun became too angry and refused to let the life giving rains fall to earth. A particularly long and hard summer may have been viewed as divine retribution for human sin. For this reason, it was important for the Aztecs to keep the sun satisfied, or else he might bring on the final judgment. The best way to satisfy this fickle deity was with the most precious substance in the universe: human blood.

Sacrifice was an important theme in the Aztec's mythology; it was something humans should do to mirror the divine. Humanity would need to give back to the gods because the gods freely accepted death, sacrificing themselves.

### **Sources**

Adams REW. 1991. *Prehistoric Mesoamerica. Third Edition.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Berdan FF. 2014. *Aztec Archaeology and Ethnohistory.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Leon-Portilla M. 1963. *Aztec Thought and Culture: A study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Read KA. 1986. The Fleeting Moment: Cosmogony, Eschatology, and Ethics in Aztec Religion and Society. *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 14(1):113-138.

Taube KA. 1993. *Aztec and Maya Myths. Fourth Edition.* Austin: University of Texas Press.

Van Tuerenhout DR. 2005. *The Aztecs. New Perspectives.* Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO Inc.