

What is the connection between Chicanas/os and the Mexica/Aztecs?

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Introduction

The connection between Chicanas/os and the Mexica, commonly called the Aztecs, is not a simple claim of direct descent. It is better understood as a cultural, historical, and political relationship that became especially powerful during the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. At a time when Mexican American history was often minimized in schools and public institutions, activists, writers, students, and artists looked to the Indigenous past of Mexico for symbols that could express dignity, continuity, and resistance. Mexica images, Nahuatl words, and the idea of Aztlán gave many people a language for saying that Mexican American communities belonged to the history of North America and should not be treated as outsiders. (Smithsonian Institution, n.d.)

This relationship is meaningful, but it also requires care. Chicanas/os are not culturally uniform, and Mexican ancestry can include many Indigenous, European, African, Asian, and other histories. The Mexica were one Nahuatl-speaking people among numerous Indigenous societies in Mesoamerica. Therefore, identifying with Mexica history is often symbolic and political rather than a genealogical statement that applies to every Chicana/o person. A balanced discussion must explain why the Mexica became so visible while also recognizing the importance of the Olmec, Toltec, Maya, Zapotec, Mixtec, Purépecha, and many living Indigenous nations.

The Historical Meaning of Mexica and Aztec

The words *Mexica* and *Aztec* are related but are not always used in exactly the same way. The people who founded Mexico-Tenochtitlan identified themselves as Mexica or Tenochca. Modern historical writing often uses “Aztec” as a broader and more familiar label, partly because Mexica traditions described an earlier homeland called Aztlán. Mexico’s National Institute of Anthropology and History explains that the Mexica, also known in many texts as Aztecs or Tenochca, rose to power during the Late Postclassic period and founded Tenochtitlan in 1325. Through alliances and military expansion, they became the leading power in much of central Mesoamerica before the fall of Tenochtitlan in 1521.

The Mexica capital left a particularly strong historical image. Tenochtitlan was built on islands in Lake Texcoco and connected to the mainland by causeways. Its temples, markets, canals, political institutions, and tribute system impressed both allies and enemies. The city also occupied the same physical space where Mexico City later developed, which made the Mexica past highly visible in

Mexican national history. The eagle, serpent, cactus, and lake associated with the foundation story of Tenochtitlan eventually became central elements of Mexico's national emblem. As a result, Mexica imagery was already familiar to many Mexican and Mexican American families long before the Chicano Movement adopted it for new purposes.

Aztlán as Memory, Myth, and Political Symbol

Aztlán is one of the strongest links between Chicana/o identity and the Mexica past. In Mexica migration traditions, Aztlán was the place from which the ancestors began a long journey before settling in the Valley of Mexico. The precise location of Aztlán has never been established. INAH notes that some researchers consider it a mythical place, while others have attempted to locate it somewhere north of central Mexico. This uncertainty is important because the Chicano use of Aztlán was not based on a proven archaeological map. It was a creative reinterpretation of a migration story.

During the Chicano Movement, Aztlán came to represent the U.S. Southwest and the historical presence of people of Mexican descent in lands that changed national control after the Mexican-American War. The symbol allowed activists to challenge the idea that Mexican Americans were permanently foreign. Instead of presenting their communities only through immigration, Aztlán framed them as part of a much longer history of movement, settlement, conquest, border change, and cultural survival in North America. (Smithsonian Institution, n.d.)

The political meaning of Aztlán became especially visible in 1969. Archival collections preserve copies of *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, a manifesto associated with the First National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference in Denver. The plan called for cultural unity, community control, education, economic organization, and political self-determination. Aztlán therefore became more than an ancient place-name. It became a way of imagining collective responsibility in the present.

The Smithsonian's National Museum of American History similarly explains that many Chicano activists drew symbols and ideas from the pre-Hispanic past, especially Mexica history. Museum collections show how artists combined Aztlán, revolutionary figures, Indigenous imagery, and contemporary experiences. These works demonstrate that the connection was not limited to academic writing. It appeared in murals, posters, poetry, music, student organizations, theater, and neighborhood art. In this setting, Mexica imagery helped people transform a history that had often been treated as distant or defeated into a source of public pride.

Why Chicanas/os Often Feel More Connected to the Mexica Than to the Olmec or Toltec

Several factors explain why the Mexica became more prominent than other Mesoamerican civilizations in Chicana/o cultural nationalism. The first is visibility. The Mexica were the dominant

power encountered by the Spanish in central Mexico, and the conquest of Tenochtitlan became a central event in accounts of Mexican history. Because Mexico City stands on and around the former Mexica capital, archaeological discoveries and public monuments continually bring this past into the present. The Mexica are also represented in the Mexican flag and national symbolism. The Olmec and Toltec were historically important, but their images do not occupy the same place in modern national culture.

The second factor is the usefulness of the Aztlán migration narrative. The Olmec civilization was much earlier, flourishing principally along the Gulf Coast, and is valued for its antiquity, monumental art, and wide cultural influence. The Toltec center at Tula also influenced later traditions, and Mexica sources themselves looked back to the Toltecs as prestigious ancestors and master artisans. However, neither civilization offered Chicano activists a symbol as adaptable as Aztlán. The story of a homeland in the north, a long migration, and the creation of a new community could be connected to borderlands history in a direct and emotionally powerful way.

The third factor is timing. During the late 1960s, the Chicano Movement needed recognizable symbols that could unite students, workers, artists, and neighborhood organizations with different local experiences. The movement itself was never a single organization or ideology. University of Washington research on its geographic history shows that it included farmworker organizing, student groups, antiwar activism, land-rights campaigns, political parties, educational reform, and cultural movements. Mexica symbols functioned as a shared visual vocabulary across these different causes. The name MEChA—Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán—illustrates how Aztlán entered the language of student activism in 1969. (Estrada, n.d.)

The fourth factor is emotional recovery. For many Chicanas/os, learning about Tenochtitlan, Nahuatl literature, monumental architecture, astronomy, agriculture, markets, and political organization challenged racist descriptions of Indigenous societies as primitive. Discovering the complexity of Mesoamerican history could be personally affirming for students who had rarely encountered Mexican or Indigenous achievements in school. The Mexica past therefore became connected to self-respect. That emotional experience helps explain why the symbolism remained influential even when the historical relationship was more complicated than a direct line of ancestry.

The Limits of a Single-Ancestor Story

Although Mexica identification can be empowering, it can also become misleading when it is presented as the only Indigenous foundation of Chicana/o identity. Mesoamerica was not one civilization. It was a large and diverse cultural region containing societies with different languages, political systems, artistic traditions, and historical experiences. The Olmec developed complex centers and monumental art many centuries before the rise of Tenochtitlan. Toltec history shaped later claims of prestige. Maya, Zapotec, Mixtec, Purépecha, Totonac, Tlaxcalan, and many other peoples made distinct contributions and did not simply disappear into an “Aztec” identity.

It is also important to remember that Indigenous peoples are not only figures from the distant past. Nahua, Maya, Mixtec, Zapotec, Purépecha, and many other communities continue to maintain languages, land relationships, religious practices, political struggles, and changing modern identities. Romantic admiration for the Mexica should not replace attention to living Indigenous people or allow outsiders to claim a specific Indigenous identity without community ties.

Chicana thinkers have also questioned versions of cultural nationalism that treated the community as if it had one masculine, heterosexual, and racially uniform identity. Chicanas, queer writers, and Indigenous critics expanded the meaning of belonging by drawing attention to gender, sexuality, class, regional difference, and the realities of mixed ancestry. Their work does not make Aztlán meaningless. Instead, it shows that symbols must be open to criticism and reinterpretation. A living identity grows through debate rather than through the repetition of a single heroic story. (Smithsonian National Museum of American History, n.d.)

What Mesoamerican Civilization Did I Enjoy Learning About Most, and Why?

The Mesoamerican civilization I found most compelling to study was the Mexica civilization, although my interest is not based only on its military power. What stands out is the way Tenochtitlan brought together engineering, religion, trade, political authority, and everyday life in a demanding lake environment. The city's causeways, canals, temples, marketplaces, and agricultural systems show that Mexica society depended on organization and skilled labor, not merely conquest. Studying the city makes it possible to imagine Mesoamerican history as lived experience: people transporting goods by canoe, merchants negotiating in crowded markets, farmers working around the lake, priests conducting ceremonies, and families belonging to local communities.

I am also interested in the Mexica because their historical memory continued to change after the conquest. Their stories survived through Indigenous-language accounts, colonial manuscripts, archaeology, national symbols, and modern art. The same image can carry different meanings in different periods. Aztlán could be a remembered homeland in a migration tradition, a contested historical question, a Chicano political metaphor, or an artistic statement about belonging. This changing meaning makes the civilization intellectually engaging because it requires the study of both ancient history and modern interpretation.

At the same time, learning about the Mexica encouraged me to look beyond them. Their own political world was connected to other peoples through trade, warfare, alliances, tribute, intermarriage, and religious exchange. They inherited ideas from earlier Mesoamerican traditions and claimed relationships with the Toltec past. Their empire also faced resistance from communities that later allied with the Spanish. The Mexica story therefore cannot be understood as the story of all Indigenous Mexico. It becomes more meaningful when placed beside the histories of the societies with which the Mexica cooperated, competed, and fought.

Conclusion

Chicanas/os feel connected to the Mexica/Aztecs because Mexica history offered a powerful language of cultural recovery during a period of civil-rights struggle. Tenochtitlan's visibility in Mexican history, the national importance of Mexica imagery, and the migration story of Aztlán made this civilization especially useful to activists searching for pride and political unity. The connection was strengthened through art, student organizing, literature, music, and public history, not simply through claims of biological descent.

However, the most accurate interpretation is a nuanced one. Mexica symbolism can express resistance and belonging, but it should not erase the diversity of Mesoamerican civilizations or the identities of living Indigenous peoples. The Olmec, Toltec, Maya, Zapotec, Mixtec, Purépecha, and many other societies deserve study in their own right. Understanding this complexity does not weaken the Chicana/o connection to the Mexica past. It makes that connection more honest, historically responsible, and capable of speaking to a diverse community. (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, n.d.)

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