

Civilized, Not Savage: The Power of Perspective in High School Curriculum about Aztec Culture

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## I. ABSTRACT

In high school history classes, the curriculum taught holds stereotypical representations of the Aztec people as “bloodthirsty” and “savage” -- stereotypes which were created by the Catholic, Europeans who colonized them. Since these misconceptions are taught, they are perpetuated. To find a way to better this curriculum, a series of high school history teachers were interviewed, an analysis of four common United States history textbooks was performed, and finally a Unit Plan, including essential questions, learning tasks, key terms, learning activities, text selection/additional resources, and finally additional comments was developed. In the Unit Plan, it is made clear that Aztec society was just as, if not more, civilized than most European civilizations at the time. It also places extra emphasis on the idea that Aztec people performed human sacrifices because they lived in a pre-scientific, superstitious, society, in which they believed they would help stop natural disasters by performing sacrifices. This distinction is important because it shows that Aztec society was not different from other European, Catholic pre-scientific, superstitious societies at the time, such as in the case of medieval public executions.

## II. INTRODUCTION

Almost everyone has heard of Aztec human sacrifices. Even in the present day, when googling “Aztec culture” some of the first pictures that appear on google images are illustrations of these human sacrifices. It is undeniable that across current society, there is a deep set stereotype that the Aztec people were “bloodthirsty” and “brutal”. How did this stereotype come to be? Is there a certain amount of bias in reporting about

Aztec culture and religion when told from Spanish, Catholic perspectives? How does this show that the stereotype about the Aztecs as “brutal” and “savage” is untrue? These questions motivated me to research the root cause of these stereotypes, which I soon found to be caused by misinformation and a lack of representation in high school history curriculum.

In my project, I would like to learn how the stereotypes of the Aztec people as “bloodthirsty” and “violent ” were created, how these stereotypes are reinforced through educational curriculum in high school history classes, and finally what an ideal curriculum that avoids these stereotypes and instead tells the full picture of the history of Aztec culture look like. The final goal of my project is to create a unit plan that can be used in high school history classes across Los Angeles, which presents the true history of the Aztec empire and its colonization.

### III. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### MISREPRESENTATION OF AZTEC CULTURE IN ACADEMIA

Aztec culture is often only written about academically to reference their use of human sacrifice. More often than not, the motivations of the sacrifice are not explored, but rather only the brutality or means of sacrifice (Eckholm). When the motivation for sacrifice is explored, it is often correlated to the fact that Aztec people are blindly following their religion, without mentioning the ecological purposes for human sacrifice. When motivations for sacrifice are explored, they are not explored without first mentioning dramatizations of Aztec human sacrifice, such as how the Spaniards saw “millions of skulls” (Harner) lined up in the central quad when they arrived to colonize

the Aztec empire. Overall, a general lack of representation, or misrepresentation when representation is present, leads to a perpetuation of the stereotype of Aztec people as bloodthirsty and violent, in both curriculum and the general psyche of society.

### IMPORTANCE OF REPRESENTATION IN CURRICULUM

Education is a means to address the shortcomings in our society and find continuous solutions for them. However, in instances where not everyone is given an equal or accurate education, such as the issue at hand, education loses its value. Education which is truly effective is education that represents and truly describes all aspects of history (Paulo). Freedom from oppression is born out of education, and can give students the skills to overcome the problems they see around them (Paulo). This is why it is so important that accurate curricula which represent all perspectives on the topic of Aztec colonization are present in high school history curricula. Through curricula like this, the stereotype of Aztec people as bloodthirsty and savage can be dismantled (University of Tulsa).

### AZTEC HISTORY AND CULTURE CONTEXT

The Aztec empire was a group of multiple central-Mexican altepetl, or city states. It was also surrounded by multiple other altepetls that were not part of the empire. They are theorized to have originated from a group of hunter-gatherers in Aztlan (Onion, Sullivan, Mullen). Aztec society largely functioned in concentric circles, or circles which work from the inside out, with the inside being the most knowledgeable/experienced and the outside being the least knowledgeable/experienced. This was how government and family was structured within the empire (Colin). Aztec society relied on a feudal government, in which the Tlatoani was the supreme leader of any given altepetl and the

Cihuacoatl was the supreme judge/administrator of the altepetl (Tarlton Law Library).

The Aztec people spoke Nahuatl, and were a heavily religious society (Onion, Sullivan, Mullen).

Societal class was also structured in concentric circles, in which Pipiltin (pip-il-tin), or nobles, were innermost in the circle. This class included priests, landowners, judges, and military commanders. They were subject to receive goods, services, and labor from commoners and their status was passed through lineage (Tarlton Law Library). Macehualtin was next in the circle, and included lower level priests, artisans, and farmers. They resided in Calpulli (neighborhood groups led by pipiltin). Calpulli existed within altepetl, similar to how neighborhoods exist within cities in the United States today (Colin). Finally, at the outermost level of the concentric circle existed Tlacotin, or serfs and slaves. Slavery could not be passed down through lineage. Individuals would become slaves to return a debt, then could buy their freedom. They could also marry, have children, or substitute another individual in their place (Tarlton Law Library).

Gender roles also existed within the Aztec empire. Men often served in the military and were involved in administrative roles across all aspects of society (Onion, Sullivan, Mullen). Women in Aztec society, while not permitted to serve in the military, however were involved in some administrative roles such as midwives and priestesses. Some also functioned as artisans and craftspeople. Overall, women were considered different to men; but equally important to society (Tarlton Law Library).

#### IV. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

My hypothesis was divided into three main parts. The first statement of my hypothesis is as follows: The stereotype of Aztec people as “brutal” and “savage” is prominent in American peoples’ writings and ideas about Aztec culture. The second is as follows: This stereotype is especially perpetuated in high school history curriculums, where students are only exposed to a very select, limited, set of text from the Spanish perspective, and nearly never from an Aztec perspective. The third is as follows: An ideal curriculum that teaches about Aztec history is one which displays the high level of civilization present in the Aztec empire before and during Spanish colonization. It is also one that allows for students to be on an equal footing with their teacher. The first and second parts of my hypothesis were measured by a textbook analysis and a series of three interviews with high school history class teachers, department heads, and curriculum heads at two Los Angeles high schools, while the third part of my hypothesis was supported by the interviews solely, alongside research previously mentioned in this journal in section III. LITERATURE REVIEW.

#### V. METHODS AND TOOLS

The first part of my project was the textbook analysis. In order to complete the textbook analysis, I asked multiple teachers what books they used in their classrooms while teaching United States history. I ultimately compiled a list of four textbooks which I analyzed. All textbooks analyzed were ranked on a scale of 1-5. 1 means that the text both glorifies colonization and briefly/does not represent the Aztec empire. 2 means the text briefly mentions the Aztec empire and does not condemn colonization. 3 means the

text briefly/extensively mentions the Aztec empire and briefly condemns colonization. 4 means the text briefly/extensively mentions the Aztec empire and condemns colonization. 5 means the text extensively mentions the Aztec empire and strongly condemns colonization. I also initially used color to denote the bias expected from each textbook. **Red** indicates text expected to show no accurate Aztec representation or glorification of Spanish colonization. **Green** indicates text expected to show little to no accurate Aztec representation, but also adequately explains the extremity of colonization. **Blue** indicates text expected to show accurate Aztec representation and adequately explain the extremity of colonization.

Attached below, under VI. RESULTS, is the table (see figure A) I used to conduct my analysis. The first column is labeled biased language, and includes any direct quotations/noticeable phrases that appeared in the text which point to a bias. The second column is labeled structure/message and seeks to compare the different structure and extensiveness of the textbooks. It is meant to provide context for how the quotations and phrases presented in the first column were delivered to the reader. Finally, the third column is the rating I assigned to the textbook, based on the aforementioned scale.

To analyze the textbooks, I read their respective sections of pre-colonial American history up until they moved on from the idea of European colonization of the Americas. This was often the first chapter of the textbook. After reading the selected section once, I went back and read it again, this time making note of any biased language and general structure/context. I also considered the introductions of the textbooks, as some of them held important qualifying information in which they stated the interpretive nature of history, which I counted as meaning they were more accurately representative of Aztec

culture, as they acknowledged that it was possible these viewpoints could have been disregarded in the past. Finally, after reading the sections of the selected textbooks twice, I gave them all a respective rating as explained in the prior text.

The second part of my project was my interviews. Two interviews were in person while one was over email. I conducted three interviews in total. The interviews were conducted with the goal of providing more context into the teacher's perspective of teaching Aztec history. I also wanted to know more about the process of making and using a Unit Plan, as it was something new to me. The main goal of my interviews was to confirm that bias existed within the high school curriculum, and to see what teachers were doing to try and avoid that. I first brainstormed questions for the interview, workshopped and finalized my questions, reached out to the interviewees via email, set up the interview with the interviewee, and in the case of the in person interviews attended and recorded the interviews. After I had the voice recordings of the interviews, I transcribed them into a google doc, alongside the one email interview, and performed an analysis of the interviews. The results were collected in the table attached below, labeled Figure B: Interview Analysis Table.

The final aspect of my project was my Unit Plan. The Unit Plan consists of unit summary and rationale, learning objectives, essential questions, big ideas, skills, key terms/vocabulary, assessments, learning activities, text selection/additional resources, and finally additional comments. It was based almost entirely on the aforementioned sources included in III. LITERATURE REVIEW, specifically from the sources under heading AZTEC HISTORY AND CULTURE CONTEXT. I also gained a decent amount of perspective on my unit plan from the interviews mentioned above in the second part of

my final project. I worked on the Unit Plan over the span of two months. The Unit Plan is attached in X. APPENDICES below.

VI. RESULTS

Attached below is the aforementioned Figure A, the textbook analysis graph.

A. Figure A: Textbook Analysis Table:

Textbook Title	Biased Language	Structure/Message	Final Rating
<p>Glencoe U.S. History: The American Vision</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Chapter one titled “Colonizing america”</li> <li>- The United State’s “historic political roots are from Europe”</li> <li>- “Unit Launch Activity: Discuss with students what they know about early colonial life”</li> <li>- “Explorations” not colonization</li> <li>- First mention of the Aztec: “1519: Hernan Cortes conquers the Aztec”</li> <li>- Did not specify who built Tenochtitlan</li> <li>- One paragraph on Aztec empire</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unit combined with the history of slavery and the colonization of Africa</li> <li>- Section one of the unit is four pages long, and is the only part that talks about the Aztec empire or ANY Native American culture</li> <li>- In combination</li> </ul>	<p>2</p>

		<p>with the Toltecs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Only mentions in context of colonization</li> </ul>	
<p><b>The American Pageant by David M. Kennedy</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Chapter titled “founding the new nation”</li> <li>- Uses “old world” and “new world”</li> <li>- Includes quotes from Christopher Columbus “I have come to believe that this is a mighty continent which was hitherto unknown. . . . Your Highnesses have an Other World here.”</li> <li>- Section one of the chapter titled “New World Beginnings”</li> <li>- “the native peoples of North America were living in small, scattered, and impermanent settlements on the eve of the Europeans’ arrival.”</li> <li>- “Onto this stage stepped Christopher Columbus. This skilled Italian</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Covers from 33,000 BC to 1783</li> <li>- Talks about colonists motives first</li> <li>- Then moves on to talk about the formation of the earth from the big bang?</li> </ul>	<p><b>1</b></p>

	<p>seafarer persuaded the Spanish monarchs to outfit him with three tiny but seaworthy ships, manned by a motley crew. Daringly, he unfurled the sails of his cockleshell craft and headed westward. His superstitious sailors, fearful of venturing into the oceanic unknown, grew increasingly mutinous. After six weeks at sea, failure loomed when, on October 12, 1492, the crew sighted an island in the Bahamas. A new world thus swam within the vision of Europeans”</p>		
<p>AP United States History, 2020 Edition AMSCO</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Uses “old world” “new world”</li> <li>- “Native population declined by 90 percent after the arrival of Europeans</li> <li>- “The Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, had a population of about 200,000, equivalent in population to the largest cities of Europe”</li> <li>- Briefly talks about Aztec culture,</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Chapter one: 1491-1607</li> <li>- Includes “alternate view”: “in recent years historians have highlighted the vibrant and</li> </ul>	<p><b>4</b></p>

	<p>however when it does it accurately captures the enormity of the Aztec empire and its sophistication</p>	<p>diverse native cultures that existed in the Americas before the arrival of Columbus... and how European disease and violence destroyed so much of these cultures”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Different sections for all native american groups</li> </ul>	
<p>The American Yawp: A Massively Collaborative Open</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Introduction which explicitly says the “new world” was not new</li> <li>- Colonization as “centuries of violence” and “unleashed the greatest biological terror the world had ever seen”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Textbook divided in volumes: this volume only goes up to the reconstruction</li> </ul>	<p><b>5</b></p>

<p>U.S. History Textbook, Vol. 1: To 1877</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Tenochtitlan as “awe inspiring” and “sprawling”</li> <li>- Mentions Aztec terms like chinampas</li> <li>- Useful text selection: “When we saw so many cities and villages built in the water and other great towns on dry land, we were amazed and said that it was like the enchantments... Some of our soldiers even asked whether the things that we saw were not a dream?... I do not know how to describe it, seeing things as we did that had never been heard of or seen before, not even dreamed about” - Bernal Diaz del Castillo (Spanish soldier)</li> <li>- Extensive history + true portrayal of the brutality of colonization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mainly talks about the Native American groups which existed in</li> <li>- Includes map of Tenochtitlan</li> </ul>	
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From my analysis, it was clear that my hypothesis was proven correct. Bias did exist in high school resources which educate students about Aztec history, in some cases to a blatant extreme. Based on my results, it was also clear that the most shallow description of Aztec history also existed in texts in which colonization was glorified. *The American Pageant* earned the

lowest rating- 1, which was surprising because it is a widely used textbook. *The American Yawp: A Massively Collaborative Open U.S. History Textbook* earned the highest rating- 5; however, it is important to note that this textbook was published in a series of volumes, allowing for it to be more extensive in the history it included. Even in some instances where there seemed to be an attempt at including a comprehensive picture of Aztec culture, such as in *AP United States History, 2020 Edition AMSCO*, the textbook was hindered by the fact that it had limited space to do so.

B. Figure B: Interview Analysis Table

Question	Words/phrases to note	Behaviors to note
<b>What is your title?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Social studies department chair</li> <li>- Assistant principal of curriculum and instruction</li> <li>- History department chair</li> </ul>	n/a
<b>Do you have any personal connections/experiences with Aztec culture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Religious synchronicity in the context of Aztec culture in conjunction with Latinae catholicism/christianity</li> <li>- Gaining a deeper understanding through experience</li> <li>- Teacher = responsibility to</li> </ul>	Great passion when speaking about connection to personal culture from the interviewee who had a connection to Aztec culture.

	<p>become as personally familiar with cultures as possible</p>	
<p><b>What is your previous experience educating about the Aztec empire?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Columbian Exchange</li> <li>- Bartholomé de Las Casas</li> <li>- “Throughout my career”</li> </ul>	<p>Lots to say; very educated and comprehensive responses</p>
<p><b>As a teacher, how do you believe what you teach informs your students biases/world views?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teacher informs student’s views because the student does not have prior experience with complex history</li> <li>- Responsibility</li> <li>- Indigenous people have agency -- not just victims to history</li> <li>- Hidden curriculum: the implicit biases that educators bring to the space, and also how the historical banking system of education’s impact on students</li> <li>- “So when you talk about how they internalize the bias, yes it's an effect of what's being</li> </ul>	<p>A lot of um’s and pauses -- they find it very important to find the right words during this part because it means a lot to them.</p>

	<p>taught, but also how it's being taught.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Connection on a personal level</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Why do you think these stereotypes against the Aztec community exist and what do you do in your teaching to combat this?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “Aztec's were the least violent or "savage" during war in comparison to any of the European wars. They didn't kill for the sake of killing”</li> <li>- Eurocentric view point</li> <li>- Christian-centric viewpoint as well</li> </ul>	<p>n/a</p>
<p><b>If you were teaching a unit about Aztec history what would you want to see in the curriculum for the course?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Las Casas</li> <li>- Shouldn't just be a one sentence blurb</li> <li>- As many sources from the Aztec perspective as possible</li> <li>- Cortez's writings that describe the brutality occurring</li> <li>- “Speaks to the complexity and robustness of the society”</li> <li>- Written by the teacher, not the textbook</li> </ul>	<p>Again great passion in speech</p>

	- Cultural landscape	
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Upon analyzing the results from my interview, it was clear that teachers did believe there was importance in representation in education. They also believed that it was their responsibility to provide a diversity in viewpoint when teaching history in order to paint the most accurate picture of the past. Because of this, they also all unanimously agreed that the best way of teaching Aztec history is not following a textbook, but rather by providing their own supplemental texts. One popular supplemental text was the writings of Bartolome Las Casas, who is mentioned in III. LITERATURE REVIEW, specifically under section AZTEC HISTORY AND CULTURE CONTEXT. Teachers also agreed that the major deficit of curriculum about Aztec culture is that it was from a euro-centric perspective, and also that this was because of European colonization. Overall, it seemed that all interviewees were in agreement with each other and also supported my hypothesis that bias was present in high school curriculum, and that this bias was perpetuated by the perspectives present in curriculum.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The most effective part of my research project progress was potentially my method of organizing my research into three sections while I was doing it. Since my project was divided into three questions, three sections of research, three hypotheses, and three final conclusions, I was allowed to develop a more complete and comprehensive view of this topic and allow my previous research and questions to inform my following ones. I found that this structure of research was optimal, and would replicate it in future research projects.

While I found my research method effective and was ultimately satisfied with my final Unit Plan, one limitation very present in my project was that of time. Given the time frame of my project, I was not able to extend the Unit Plan to the sophistication I would like to. Another fault of the time limitation I experienced was that I was unable to analyze as many textbooks I would like to complete. Ideally, a textbook analysis would occur with a larger sample size of textbooks. I would also like to extend the analysis to include textbooks in Spanish or other local languages to observe if it would affect what was included in the textbook. I think it would also be useful to include a more clear middle-ground within the textbook selection, as no textbook analyzed was given a rating of 3.

On another note, if I had more time, I would like to include more about the Nahuatl language in my research, perhaps even learning it myself. I would especially like to include Nahuatl in my Unit Plan, and potentially even learn more about the language and why it is important, along with how it continues to exist today. While it would lead me down a somewhat different path in my research, it would certainly be interesting to know the culture on a deep level, as such a big part of culture is the language behind it.

Another limitation I faced during this resource project was the resources available to me as a high school student. If I had more credibility as an educator or an author, I would have preferred to publish and make the Unit Plan public. I feel strongly that I would like to continue the Unit Plan throughout the future and eventually attempt to publish it, however at this time this is unlikely due to my age and grade at the moment.

If others are researching this topic, I would recommend that they continue to examine the bias within textbooks, and expand upon my supplemental analysis of

textbooks. Potentially the project could even be expanded to include the writing of a textbook with the goal of providing an accurate perspective on Aztec culture. If one is interested, I would also encourage them to expand my project to include more about the Nahuatl language, as I mentioned before.

## VIII. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would firstly like to extend a heartfelt thank you to my interviewees, Ms. Hourig Baghdasarian, History Department Chair at Alverno Heights Academy, Mr. Eric Mc Gee, Social Studies Department Chair at Flintridge Sacred Heart, and Mr. Daniel Rios, Assistant Principal of Curriculum and Instruction at Flintridge Sacred Heart. They kindly and compassionately lent me their precious time, thoughts, and input multiple times throughout my process. My research was heavily influenced and guided by their responses and input, and many of the text selections included in my Unit Plan were recommended by them. I would like to extend a special thank you to Mr. Rios for his continued support of my research project from its inception. This project would not have evolved into what it is today without his input and help. Secondly, I would like to thank my research class teacher, Ms. Alexis Salazar for all of her input and critique. She helped me stay on track and complete my project to the best it could be. Finally, thank you to my classmates Aideen Alpuerto '23, Siena Urquiza '23, and all of my peers in the Church on Turtle Island research class for listening to my ideas, critiquing my pitches, and proofreading my work. This project would not have been possible without the help of all the aforementioned people, and the completion of the project is thanks to them.

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## X. APPENDICES

Attached here is my aforementioned Final Project, the Unit Plan:

[Aztec History for High School Students Unit Plan](#)