

I went to the courtroom and asked the judge if it's a crime to love you.

He sentenced me to death.

Ay yay yay, my love, why don't you love me?

The day they kill me, may it be with five bullets,

And I will be very close to you, so as to die in your arms.

Ay yay yay, my love, why don't you love me?

For a casket, I want a *sarape*,

For a crucifix, my crossed ammunition belts.

And upon my tombstone, write my final farewell with a thousand bullets.

Ay yay yay, my love, why don't you love me?

II

Ancient Civilizations

If the analysts of “*lo mexicano*” agree on anything, it is that Mexico was home to magnificent civilizations and cultures prior to the coming of the Europeans, and that much of the country’s subsequent history has witnessed attempts to deny, suppress, and, more recently, politically incorporate the vestiges of those civilizations and cultures. During the independence period, some thinkers invoked the glories of ancient Mexico, but their sincerity is difficult to judge: they seem to have regarded those glories largely as a convenient rhetorical device to deny the legitimacy of the Spanish conquest and colonial rule, not to suggest that Mexico’s indigenous cultures be revived or even respected. The twentieth century, however, saw tremendous advances in understanding and appreciation of ancient Mexico, particularly after the Mexican revolution, through the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH, in its Spanish acronym). Today, a visit to the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City cannot help but overwhelm the visitor, and the ruins of the indigenous civilizations annually attract and impress countless thousands of tourists.

The earliest civilizations of Mesoamerica began to take shape around 2000 B.C.; by 1200 B.C. impressive cities had been built and a distinctive Mesoamerican religion had evolved. Around A.D. 300, the region entered its so-called “classical period,” a time when huge cities such as Teotihuacán in central Mexico, and the Zapotec city of Monte Albán, in the southern state of Oaxaca, dominated large territories. In the jungles and mountains to the southeast, the Maya erected splendid city-states, created elaborate ceramics, studied the stars and planets, and developed a system of writing. By around A.D. 800–900, the classical civilizations entered into a decline that has still not been adequately explained. Subsequent cultures tended to be more fragmented and bellicose than their predecessors, but they nevertheless achieved a high degree of sophistication. In central Mexico, the region of the largest populations and highest development, successive waves of *chichimecas*, or nomadic peoples, moved in from the north to enjoy the good life on the fertile central plateau.

The Aztecs—easily the best known of Mexico’s indigenous cultures—were one such group. After migrating into the lake region of central Mexico in the mid-1200s, they endured years of tribulation before establishing what would become their awe-inspiring capital city of Tenochtitlán. By the mid-1400s, in alliance with other city-states of the region, the Aztecs launched a campaign of imperial domination that would win them a precarious control of much of central and southern Mexico.

Mesoamerican cultures were complex and sophisticated, but they also earned a reputation for brutality. The following readings aim to provide readers with a brief introduction to the mythology, religious beliefs and practices, values, and enduring legacy of these cultures, which, while certainly subordinated, continue to resonate in modern Mexico.