

## Chapter 2

### **Ancient Indigenous People: *La Gente Indígena***



The story of *La Raza* begins with the indigenous people, *la gente indígena*. What does this mean? Why the term *indigenous*? Indigenous is not merely a term but a major concept and a perspective. Chicano-Latino Studies frequently make reference to an indigenous perspective. This perspective encompasses a cultural point of view and worldview. An indigenous perspective must be an integral part of understanding the cultural roots of *La Raza*. Any historical or contemporary analysis of Chicano-Latino culture that excludes or ignores an indigenous perspective is, by definition, incomplete.

Our narrative starts with an account of the Western Hemisphere known today as the Américas. Who were the first human beings to live here? Where did they come

from? When and how did they arrive in these lands? A human epic and evolution took place over thousands of years.

This is the study of pre-Columbian América. The study examines the people who occupied the Western Hemisphere prior to the time that Columbus supposedly “discovered América.” In searching for a route to the Indies, Columbus arrived in the Caribbean islands. Columbus and his men were the first Europeans on the continent, according to most popular thought. They called the inhabitants *Indians*, thinking that they had reached the Indies. The label stuck, and hundreds of years later people say in Spanish, *los indios*. From the Chicano-Latino perspective, the concept of preference is, the indigenous people, *la gente indígena*.

*Indigenous* refers to the first original founders and inhabitants of a land. These indigenous people were the ones who in fact “discovered América.” In anthropology, the most popular explanation of the very first arrivals in the Américas is the Bering Strait theory. What is a theory? A theory is a set of ideas framed to explain the unknown. It is an educated guess and logical deduction based on the available data. Theory helps to define and clarify, and it is a point of reference and point of departure. A theory provides a set of ideas—a plausible explanation—whose strengths and weaknesses can be assessed. The Bering Strait theory holds that indigenous people migrated across a land bridge from Asia to Alaska during the Pleistocene Ice Age. Scientists argue as to whether this migration took place as early as 50,000 years ago or as late as 10,000 B.C. According to anthropologist Eric Wolf in his book *Sons of the Shaking Earth*, it probably took some 600 generations to travel the land from today’s Alaska all the way down to the tip of South América.<sup>1</sup> This was a slow, gradual migration over thousands of years. These original discoverers of América probably did not even have a concept of what they had done. Indigenous people occupied their native land and provided names for geographical regions in their native languages. The notion of *Western Hemisphere*, *América*, and *New World* is the European perspective of this part of the world.

These indigenous arrivals were people of the Stone Age striving for mere survival. They were migrant people for thousands of years. They lived as nomadic wanderers, moving from place to place searching for food. As hunters and gatherers, they learned to survive under the harshest of conditions. They were probably guided by a struggle for survival based on their adaptation to a cruel physical environment. Climatic conditions beyond their control determined their fate. Food for nourishment was an overwhelming concern. What plants growing in the wild were

edible? Wild berries, seeds, acorns, nopal, maguey? What animals running wild were available in the environment to hunt for food? Rabbits, deer, fish, insects, birds, mammoths? Generations of experience based on trial and error taught them to use and appreciate the flora and fauna, plants and animals. Survival itself was a major accomplishment. And notwithstanding the human concern, they learned to beware of the predators! The ways and means they used to adapt to their harsh environment are called *ecological adaptation*. It is unimaginable what men and women had to overcome during this time period.

**Note to Students** For an excellent visual presentation that depicts the life of indigenous people during this epoch, Google: history channel: journey to 10,000 B.C. A description of the program states:

*Viewers will go back in time to when early humans are just starting to inhabit North America and huge climate fluctuations cause a mini-Ice Age. The saber tooth cat, the giant ground sloth and the woolly mammoth are suddenly becoming extinct. How does man survive? Travel to early archaeological sites in North America and watch as scientists uncover fossilized bones, ancient homes and weapons of stone.*

Also included in the program are new theoretical ideas that present a different perspective on the Bering Strait theory.

## **Mesoamérica**

The cultures and civilizations of this chapter focus on Mesoamérica. The geographical location generally covers central México and Central América. Within this region, indigenous people attained an incredible level of civilization. The ancient world of Mesoamérica is a source of wonder to this day.

As previously stated, indigenous people had a nomadic lifestyle for thousands of years. How did people graduate from nomadic wanderers, hunters, and gatherers to a higher, more sophisticated mode of existence and lifestyle? Gradually, a revolutionary change occurred in their way of living that affected their life forever. This became known as the *Agricultural Revolution*.

How did the Agricultural Revolution change their lives? With farming and irrigation, people were able to grow their own crops. It revolved around the domestication of plants, and it occurred slowly over the millennia. This required the intelligence to identify desirable plants and seeds. Learning to cultivate was an art

and science. This was no little accomplishment, but instead a huge step forward for humankind. The domestication of plants provided for a stable food supply. As in previous generations, they no longer had to wander and migrate from place to place in search of food. Agriculture provided the people an opportunity to develop a settled way of life or sedentism. With the cultivation of crops developed a sedentary lifestyle and permanent settlements springing up in the best agricultural areas. The power of plants, fruits, and vegetables—what an awesome power to control for the first time in human history! Villages and towns became commonplace. A stable food supply also meant a revolution in the concept of time in daily life. Some people were now free to think and wonder. The Agricultural Revolution made it possible for men and women to expand and refine their culture.

The key to understanding the development of agriculture and irrigation in Mesoamérica is the domestication of corn. Corn was unknown in the rest of the world until it was cultivated by the indigenous people. Years ago, scientists asked the research question, What is the specific location where corn was first domesticated? They circled and circled the Américas and identified several locations. Scientists finally came upon a little valley in central México known as the Tehuacán Valley, *Valle de Tehuacán*, located in the state of Puebla. After several seasons of excavation, it was finally determined to be the place where corn agriculture began, about 5000 to 7000 B.C. Farming and irrigation after about 2000 B.C. was commonplace in fertile areas.

From the Chicano-Latino perspective, the importance of corn cultivation and agriculture cannot be emphasized enough. This was a revolutionary discovery. Just as microchips and computers have revolutionized the world today, agriculture revolutionized indigenous culture. Thousands of years later, we see the many uses of corn and corn products now in our daily life. Not only was it corn but many other agricultural crops. This included varieties of beans, *chiles*, potatoes, tomatoes, squash, pumpkins, yams, peanuts, cashew nuts, sunflowers, avocados, strawberries, pineapples, and many more. The Inca in Perú are especially known for their ingenuity in domesticating a large variety of potatoes. The indigenous people developed the process for making maple syrup, vanilla, and chocolate. It is intriguing to discover how the Maya came up with the process for chocolate. It goes without saying that today, all these food products feed the world and are a huge part of the global economy.

***Note to Students*** To learn more about the discovery of chocolate, go to <http://www.nationalgeographic.com> and see the story “Ancient Chocolate Found in Maya ‘Teapot.’”

The indigenous people contributed these crops to the world. When the Spanish arrived in the New World, they were amazed and intrigued by the great assortments of foods, fruits, and vegetables in the diet of the indigenous people. These fruits and vegetables were then exported by the Spanish to Spain and from Spain to the rest of Europe and the world. From the indigenous perspective, these ancient people deserve the credit, acknowledgment, and recognition for their major contribution. It is unfortunate that people still harbor prejudice and negative stereotypes, such as, “Indians were a bunch of wild savages running around naked, shooting with bow and arrows.” Quite the contrary; they had the intelligence to create civilizations that amaze the world to this day. The indigenous people unleashed their creativity and imagination in the creation of culture and civilization.

We should also appreciate the many beautiful flowers that were domesticated in the Américas by the indigenous people. A perfect example is illustrated by José Antonio Burciaga in his book *Drink Cultura, Chicanismo*. The poinsettia Christmas flower is very popular in the United States. In truth, the plant is a Mexican flower called *cuetlaxochitl* by the Aztecs. Burciaga states:

*The cuetlaxochitl was cultivated as an exotic gift from nature and admired but never touched. Its bright red color had been given by some god as a reminder of the periodic sacrificial offerings in accordance with the creation of the Fifth Sun. . . . Five hundred years after the encounter between Europe and this continent, we should attempt to recapture the history and contributions of the indigenous peoples. It would be a noble act to give the flower its original name, cuetlaxochitl—“flower that withers, flower that perishes like all that is pure”—as a reminder of wounded Mother Earth.<sup>2</sup>*

The indigenous perspective relates a philosophy of respect and appreciation for the natural order. Philosophically, it is a profound awareness of the dynamic equilibrium among humankind, nature, and the universe.

During the pre-Columbian era, there were hundreds of indigenous cultures. In fact, their descendants still live today throughout the Américas. The following sections provide a brief description and introduction to a small sample of these people. We can see these groups as a reflection of the many accomplishments and achievements of the indigenous people as a whole.

**Note to Students** Opposing Viewpoints: Do the indigenous peoples from the Américas believe in the Bering Strait Theory? Do they have stories of Creation and



Genesis that took place on this continent? How are these traditional stories similar or different from the Western ideas and philosophical thought? Could it be possible that the Creator, the Great Spirit, put the indigenous peoples on this land since the beginning of time?

## **Olmeca**

Of the many civilizations of Mesoamérica, chronologically the first one of major impact and influence is the Olmec, *Olmeca*. As the parent of future generations of cultures, the Olmec are called the Mother Culture, *la cultura madre*. The center of the Olmec civilization was the region of today's Veracruz, México. Their power and influence spread for many hundreds of miles in all directions. Actually, Ignacio Bernal, in his book *The Olmec World*, states, "The Olmec zone covered a total of about 7,000 square miles."<sup>3</sup> This means the cultural influence of these people was indeed extensive. At their height, Olmec civilization existed from about the 1200s B.C. to around the 100s B.C.

A series of scientific expeditions in the early 1900s to Veracruz could not have been more amazing. Gigantic stone heads averaging 18 tons were discovered. The source of the stone used could only be from miles away. Over a dozen of these colossal stone heads have been found. The face of a person is carved on each of these huge boulders. The name *Olmec* was given to the newly discovered people. Other findings at Olmec archaeological sites include pottery, figurines, and *stelae*, inscribed stone slabs.

Clearly, the Olmec were intellectuals. They are credited with the concept of zero in the New World. Zero, as a place holder, is the key to a mathematical system. Unlike our base-10 or decimal system, they used a vigesimal system, base-20. With their counting system, the Olmec could calculate everything from simple arithmetic to advanced math. Apparently, future cultures and civilizations used Olmec mathematical concepts to do science, architecture, engineering, and building construction.

The Olmec contemplated the concept of time. Similar to the concept of zero and a mathematical system, understanding the concept of time is characteristic of advanced cognitive thinking and the power of conceptualization. They invented a system for measuring time. Chronology is the science of developing a system to accurately measure time intervals. This means keeping the time of day. It also involves inventing an accurate calendar to record days, weeks, months, years, centuries, and millennia. It is as though the Olmec were obsessed with the concept of time, or at least, it was a major preoccupation.

To study these ancient indigenous people is to have more questions than answers, the mystery of the Olmec. What happened to the Olmec civilization? Why were their ceremonial sites abandoned? Educated guesses abound, but no one knows for sure. New discoveries await as research continues.

An example of a new discovery was reported in 2006 by *New York Times* writer John Noble Wilford. The headline reads: “Stone discovered with 3,000-year-old unknown script.” He reports: “A stone slab bearing 3,000-year-old writing previously unknown to scholars has been found in the Mexican state of Veracruz, and archaeologists say it is an example of the oldest script ever discovered in the Western Hemisphere.” The discovery was by archaeologists Carmen Rodriguez Martinez of the National Institute of Anthropology and History of México and Ponciano Ortiz Ceballos of Vera Cruz University.<sup>4</sup> This demonstrates that there are many treasures in the Américas waiting to be found.

**Note to Students** Do research and learn the progress of deciphering this unknown newly discovered Olmec writing.

Today, we look back and marvel at the ingenuity, creativity, and imagination of the Olmec, *los Olmeca, la cultura madre*. Their cultural influence continued for centuries. As Ignacio Bernal states, “The end of the Olmec world is not an end but a beginning. It leads directly into the Classic world of Teotihuacán, Monte Alban, Tajín, and the Maya. These people were to absorb the Olmec inheritance and push civilization to far higher levels. They would reach a new ledge on the rocky ascent to civilization.”<sup>5</sup>



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## Maya

The Maya civilization spanned a period of over a thousand years and covered a huge geographical region. The ancient Maya lived in today's southern México, the Yucatán Peninsula, and Central América. The time period of the Maya went from the early classic, late classic, to the post classic, which is approximately from the 200s to 1200s A.D.

Who were the Maya? What inspired their soaring culture? The Maya reached a high level of civilization and culture rarely attained by humankind. What were the accomplishments and achievements of the Maya? These are intriguing characteristics of their life, culture, and society over a lengthy time span of many generations:

Agriculture

Astronomy

Architecture

Art and science of health and medicine

This includes what today are called folk healers, *curanderos* and *curanderas*.

Art, music, dance, literature, poetry

Building construction

This included all sorts of design and construction—buildings, bridges, pathways, streets, waterways, and waterworks.

Cities of many thousands of residents

Of course some people lived in small towns, villages, and in the countryside.

City planning

Urban and rural planning was necessary in order to lay out cities in an organized and effective configuration. This included city districts and zones, such as residential areas; business, trade, and commerce districts; the farmers' market, *mercado*; and agricultural zones.

Engineering in many fields of specialty

Today we may call these specialties—for example, architectural, civil, environmental, mining, surveying, and hydraulic engineering.

Irrigation

Mathematics

Philosophy

Pyramids

Religion





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## Sculpture

### Writing, books, and libraries

The Maya were intellectual giants. Maya religion, art, philosophy, science, and learning were closely intertwined. They were master builders and artists. Their pyramids were magnificent in scope and design. Maya astronomy was surprisingly accurate. Only centuries of patient recordkeeping could account for their knowledge of the moon, sun, and stars. They developed an accurate solar calendar. Who could question the Maya leader who could predict when a shadow would appear before the moon or the sun would disappear? At the time when Europe fell into the Dark Ages, Maya intellect soared.

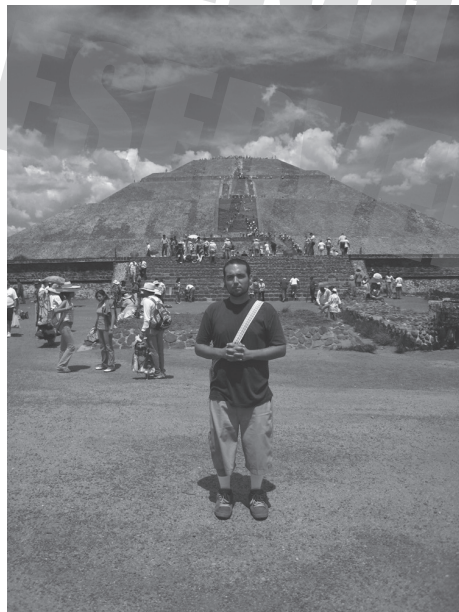
The mystery of the Maya revolves around questions regarding the rise and fall of this great civilization. War, revolution, internal upheaval, one or all may have been the cause of their downfall. All we know is that at a certain time, their beautiful cities and sacred sites were abandoned. The jungle reclaimed its buildings, monuments, and pyramids with the wild vegetation of the mighty rainforest. With the study of this magnificent civilization we are learning how men and women rose to a lofty pinnacle seldom

seen by humankind. The beauty of the situation is that the ancient Maya will never be forgotten and their direct descendants live in Mesoamérica today.

**Note to Students** Students are encouraged to go online to see the many glorious and magnificent pyramids and archaeological sites of the Maya. A few examples include Bonampak, Chichén-Itza (including the astronomical observatory), Copán, Palenque, Tajín, Tikal, Tulum, and Uxmal.

### **Teotihuacanos**

Another great ancient indigenous civilization is Teotihuacán and the people called Teotihuacanos. This archaeological site is located some thirty miles northeast of México City. This sacred site is referred to as the *City of the Gods*. It is the location of the Pyramid of the Sun, a massive pyramid, and the largest in central México. Adjacent is the Street of the Dead, leading to the Pyramid of the Moon. The third major pyramid is the Feathered Serpent. It is estimated that the height of the civilization was approximately from the late 100s to about 600s or 700s A.D. Perhaps some 100,000 to maybe 200,000 people lived in this area during its zenith. The downfall of Teotihuacán is the subject of much debate and controversy. Was it war, invasion, revolution, internal upheaval, political unrest, drought, one or all? There are many theories, and the research continues.



Teotihuacán

Pictured in the forefront is Professor Matt Espinoza Watson

The purpose of this chapter is merely to provide a brief introduction to the spectacular history, heritage, and culture of the Olmeca, Maya, and Teotihuacanos. There were countless cultures too numerous to include in this brief overview—such as the Tolteca, Mixteca, and Zapoteca. For the serious student, there are many books and media available for study. Thousands of tourists visit awesome archaeological locations and sacred sites throughout Mesoamérica. When visiting a site, you may notice scientists from all over the world continuing to do excavations. Many questions remain to be answered concerning these amazing and enigmatic civilizations.

## **The Story of the Azteca-Mexica**

The Azteca were the last of the great Mesoamerican empires. The story of the Azteca begins with their legendary homeland. These indigenous people lived in the faraway place of Aztlán (Azatatlán). From the Chicano-Latino perspective and the Chicano Movement of the 1960s, the Southwest of the United States was proclaimed Aztlán. Supposedly, due to earthquakes, drought, and famine, they decided to leave their



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Sun Stone Calendar. See: *The Book of the Sun*, Tomatiuh by Dr. Cecilio Orozco, Ph. D.

homeland and journey south. The departure from Aztlán was probably about the early 1100s A.D. They traveled a long way, searching for a place to settle.

The Azteca arrived in the Valley of México, *Valle de Anáhuac*. This may have been about the mid-1200s. It turned out to be a series of islands in the middle of a series of lakes. They were in search of a sign—an eagle, perched on a cactus with a serpent in its beak—that would indicate they were in the right place. Finally, the omen and the prophecy came to pass. (This is the symbol seen in the middle of the Mexican flag.) After much strife, conflict, trials and tribulations, and even bloodshed, they settled on a swampy island. On Lake Texcoco they established Tenochtitlán, the Azteca capitol.

The Azteca built a massive empire and confederation overseeing millions of people. The Azteca were also known as the Mexica (pronounced “Mesheeka”). Their language was Náhuatl. Slowly but surely, they developed their unique culture, society, and civilization.

The Azteca were master engineers and architects; thus, they built causeways or bridges from the mainland to Tenochtitlán. They also built magnificent aqueducts to provide fresh water for the large populace. Dams and dikes were built to preserve the city. Relay runners delivered mail throughout. This could only be described as a robust metropolitan city.

Agriculture to feed a large population was a major endeavor. As the populace increased and land became limited, the people of Tenochtitlán developed an ingenious method of growing crops. These were *chinampas*, floating gardens. People constructed rafts made from wooden branches. They piled them with dirt and mud. On this raft they planted and grew their fruits and vegetables. Today, visitors can visit vestiges of the floating gardens, *los jardines flotantes*, in Xochimilco, Distrito Federal, México.

Azteca society and culture were stratified into different aspects of daily life. People involved themselves in various groups and communities. Social stratification meant that within society, people were in social classes based on jobs, professions, status, and prestige. Based on this, people went to different schools and colleges.

This is a brief example of the stratification in the daily life of the Azteca:

<i>Calmecac</i>	College and monastery school for priests and leaders
<i>Calpulli</i>	Self-sustaining units of land owned by a family group with set boundaries, granting full rights for growing, hunting, fishing, and livelihood



<i>Cuicacalli</i>	School for women, especially giving the noblewoman an opportunity to become a priestess (house of songs)
<i>Macequales</i>	Members of calpullis
<i>Mayeques</i>	Group of natives, similar to serfs, with few if any rights
<i>Pipiltin</i>	Members of certain calpulli, who became the ruling class
<i>Pochteca</i>	Buyers, traders, merchants (not agrarian farmers)
<i>Tectecuhtin</i>	Persons who served their society as warriors
<i>Telpochcalli</i>	Training center for the warriors
<i>Tlatoques</i>	Persons elected to serve as orators for each calpulli
<i>Tlacotin</i>	Persons who indentured themselves to rulers as laborers

In a highly advanced civilization, people were required to perform a large variety of functions that were necessary for an organized society. These ranged from homemakers to leaders, priests, warriors, scientists, farmers, artists, philosophers, and anyone else needed. This is called the *social organization* of society and culture.

During pre-Columbian times, indigenous México had a population of major proportions. According to *The Course of Mexican History* by Meyer, Sherman, and Deeds, “If, as some authorities believe, all of Mexico had a population approaching 30 million, it was more populous than any country in Europe. France, the largest, had about 20 million, and Spain, 10 at most.” And in regard to Tenochtitlán, “Even with the more conservative estimate of 150,000 to 200,000 residents accepted by most scholars, the Aztec capital was one of the largest cities in the world.”<sup>6</sup> The arts and humanities were most important in the daily lives of the Azteca. Art, music, dance, literature, and philosophy were human endeavors that embellished the quality of life. The philosophical ideas and perspectives they developed are especially fascinating and intriguing. In *Aztec Thought and Culture*, Miguel León-Portilla quotes the philosopher and poet Nezahualcōyotl:

*A poem attributed to the famous Nezahualcōyotl questions the possibility of finding satisfaction in earthly things:*

*What does your mind seek?  
Where is your heart?  
If you give your heart to each and every thing,  
you lead it nowhere: you destroy your heart.  
Can anything be found on earth?  
...*



*Truly do we live on earth?  
 Not forever on earth; only a little while here.  
 Although it be jade, it will be broken,  
 Although it be gold, it is crushed,  
 Although it be quetzal feather, it is torn asunder.  
 Not forever on earth; only a little while here.<sup>7</sup>*

Nezahualcōyotl reflects on philosophical questions regarding life, death, reality and human existence.

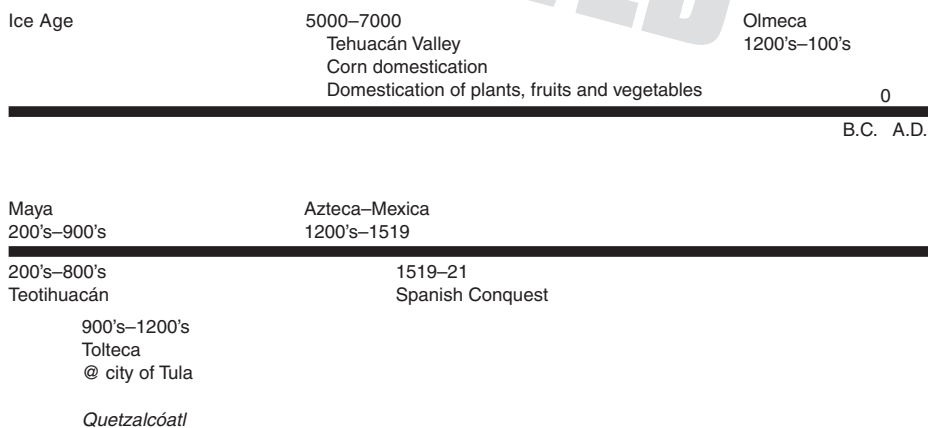
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AZTEC THOUGHT AND CULTURE: A STUDY OF THE ANCIENT NAHUATL MIND by LEON PORTILLA, MIQUEL.  
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Indigenous philosophical schools of thought dealt with the full range of human concerns and the human condition. This included birth, life, death, mortality, spiritualism, destiny, meaning, wisdom, reality, existence, creation, the Creator, the heavens, earth, and the universe.

**Note to Students** For an intriguing visual graphic of Tenochtitlán, go to the History Channel and the program titled “Engineering an Empire: The Aztecs.” According to this program, the Aztec empire covered an area of tens of thousands of square miles and included many millions of subjects.

### Timeline—Pre-Columbian América



## **A Chicano-Latino Perspective on the Study of Indigenous History, Heritage, and Culture**

Why study the indigenous cultural roots? This may be a perplexing and bewildering question. Chicano-Latino Studies Professor Matt Espinoza Watson, JD, provides this insight and reflection:

*The Importance of Indigenous Thought & Culture to 21st century Chican@s*

*Learning about the civilizations of ancient Mexico can change you. That's a warning and a challenge: On one hand, it is like looking into the mirror, and seeing an ancient reflection of yourself through your ancestors. It's learning that our history is not just crossing borders; it goes far deeper than just the history of Mexicanos in the U.S. But it also gives us the idea that migrations have been a part of our history for thousands of years. It gives us a different way of looking at ourselves, our culture, and the world around us.*

*It's learning that the treasures of ancient Mexico were not carried off by Cortes and the Conquistadores, but are still here with us in the teachings, myths, poetry, art and legends of the Mexica, Maya, Olmecatl, and Toltecatl. It's also understanding that these treasures are universal, and have something for everyone, regardless of where your own ancestors are from.*

*Learning about America before the arrival of Europeans can open many doors. For most of us, our education simply left out anything about the achievements of these remarkable civilizations. If we've heard anything, it's that they were bloodthirsty savages (a view reinforced recently through Mel Gibson's Apocalypto). We don't hear that our ancestors were living in cities of 200,000 while Europe was in the dark ages (the first cities on the American continent); that the calendars developed in ancient Mexico more than 2000 years ago are more accurate than any other calendar developed by any people at any point in recorded history (including the Gregorian calendar, which we use today). We don't hear about the highly advanced architects, astronomers, mathematicians, botanists, farmers, sculptors, warriors and poets that flourished in ancient Mexico. And because we don't hear this, we don't know a part of ourselves, and we underestimate our own potential.*

*We lack roots in many ways. As we are more 'connected' to each other through technology, we are less connected with ourselves and our past. Our experiences of nature are few & far between. We can begin to reconnect though. There is knowledge here that helps us understand the world around us, from the stars*

*and solar system, to the very principles of life itself and the mysteries of the beyond. Some of us speak Spanish, some are still immersed in Mexican culture within the U.S., while others of us are generations removed from Mexico and any type of ancestral knowledge of our past. Most of us have lost the connection to these civilizations, and with it, lost a part of ourselves. The part of ourselves that is the knowledge of our great great grandparents and ancestors, that helps us see ourselves properly & know who we are. As one former student put it, “we’re still trying to rub the brown off of our skin in many ways because we’re not hearing the voices of our past; communication of that sort is a medicine and we have to take it and learn from it in order to start decolonizing ourselves.”*

*At the same time, even the most far removed of us still have ties to these ancient civilizations: Every time you mention “chocolate,” “tomato,” or an “avocado,” you are using the language of the Aztecs. Every time you eat a taco or a tortilla chip or popcorn, you are connecting to one of the remarkable achievements of your ancestors: inventing corn. Long before Genetically Engineered organisms, ancient Mexican plant scientists cross-bred a grass that was of no use to humans into a highly nutritious & adaptable food that would be the basis of civilizations all over the continent, and later, the world.*

*In this country we’re taught Mexicans are foreigners who don’t belong here, that Mexicans aren’t intelligent, and many of us come to believe it, because we haven’t heard any different. But armed with the power of the knowledge of our ancestors, we can reclaim our future and take our rightful place as leaders within this society. As a mural in the Zapatista community of La Realidad says, “En el presente se estudia el pasado para ver hacia el futuro.” (In the present we study the past to look toward the future.) As we look to the past, we can hear the words of the last tlatoani, or leader of the Mexica, named Cuauhtemoc, who left a message as the great city of Tenochtitlán lay in ruins: “Our beloved sun has disappeared and has left us in total darkness. But we know that it will again return, will again come out and will come anew to shine upon us . . . Now we deliver the task to our children that they guard our writings and our knowledge. . . . And do not forget to inform our children intensely how it will be. How we will rise! How the destiny of our beloved motherland Anahuak will be realized and how we will help it fulfill its grand destiny.” There are many that think that the dawning of the sixth sun, that Cuauhtemoc spoke of, is upon us. Will we rise to the occasion? Let us begin looking toward the future now, by learning about our past. . . .*

## Chapter Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the history, heritage, and culture of *la gente indígena*.
2. What were the major achievements and accomplishments of the ancient indigenous civilizations?
3. What was happening in Europe during the time of the Olmeca to the Azteca?
4. What is the cultural influence of *la gente indígena* for Mexican Americans and Latinos today?
5. Research the following. The date December 21, 2012, event in the Maya calendar. Why was the concept of time important to the Maya?

