

Aztecs: Sacrifice and Self-Sacrifice

Pillar: Positive Social Environments

Division: III

Grade Level: 8

Core Curriculum Connections: Social Studies

I. Rationale: Students develop an understanding of how the Aztec worldview influenced their choices, decisions, and customs. Religion and government were directly linked in the Aztec Empire and one particular ritual was deeply embedded in both - the practice of human sacrifice to appease the Gods. Students will relate Aztec sacrifice to sacrifice in other contexts by discussing the concept of sacrifice for the common good and debating how far they can go to sacrifice for the common good. Students brainstorm different forms of sacrifice for the common good and decide when a particular sacrifice is justified and when is it a violation of individual rights. Students will then have the opportunity to participate in a service learning opportunity by performing a small sacrifice to benefit someone else.

II. Pillar Focus (Positive Social Environments):

The students will:

- provide examples of present-day sacrifices and explain the benefits of these sacrifices.
- discuss and come to a consensus about when the costs of a sacrifice exceed the benefits.
- brainstorm small sacrifices made in the school, home, and community settings.
- participate in a service learning opportunity by performing a small sacrifice to benefit someone else.

III. Curriculum Outcomes: Grade 8 Social Studies

8.3 Worldviews in Conflict: The Spanish and the Aztecs

General Outcome

Through an examination of Spanish and Aztec societies, students will demonstrate an understanding and appreciation of how intercultural contact affects the worldviews of societies.

Specific Outcomes

Values and Attitudes

8.3.1 appreciate how a society's worldview influences the society's choices, decisions and interactions with other societies (C, I)

Knowledge and Understanding

8.3.4 assess, critically, how the Aztecs were affected by the Spanish worldview by reflecting upon the following:

- What were the key elements of the worldview of the Aztec civilization prior to contact with the Spanish? (TCC, I, CC)
- How did the Aztec civilization's worldview influence the Aztecs' choices, decisions and customs? (TCC, CC, PADM)

8.S.1 develop skills of critical thinking and creative thinking:

- re-evaluate personal opinions to broaden understanding of a topic or an issue
- generate creative ideas and strategies in individual and group activities

8.S.5 demonstrate skills of cooperation, conflict resolution and consensus building:

- consider the needs and perspectives of others

- demonstrate leadership within groups where appropriate

8.S.6 develop age-appropriate behaviour for social involvement as responsible citizens contributing to their community:

- volunteer with organizations, projects and activities that ensure the growth and vitality of their community

IV. Materials:

- Reference books about Aztec civilization and religion
- Overhead projector, screen and transparency
- Chart paper or overhead projector for brainstorming list
- Student copies of *Small Sacrifices (attached)*

V. Procedure:

Anticipatory Set:

Many ancient civilizations and religions practiced some form of human or animal sacrifice to appease the gods and ensure prosperity. Even today, some cultures practice ritual sacrifice of bits of food or crops to ensure continued abundance. However, no one practiced human sacrifice to the degree of the Aztecs in their devotion to appeasing the gods. The Aztecs didn't always practice human sacrifice. Sometime around 1450, the growing Aztec empire was experiencing severe drought that lasted for four years and destroyed their valuable corn crops. The Aztec priests encouraged the people to sacrifice blood to the gods to regain their favor. In desperation, the Aztecs sacrificed thousands of people in a few weeks. By awful coincidence the rain came and restored the corn crops. With this powerful evidence, what do you think the Aztec leaders learned? Soon the practice of human sacrifice became a necessary ritual to maintain the lifestyle they built. This leads us to wonder how far we should go to sacrifice for the common good.

1. Read sections of student texts and reference books about the different gods and religious practices of the Aztecs either aloud or in small groups to gain an understanding of the Aztec religious structure. Discuss and record student responses to the following questions:

- ✓ How are religion and government linked in Aztec society?
- ✓ Who are some of the major gods and what do they represent?
- ✓ Why are some gods feared and some loved?
- ✓ Why is war such a major part of the Aztec culture?
- ✓ How do they view life after death?
- ✓ Compare Aztec stories to tales from other religions. How are they similar and how are they different?

2. Have a class discussion about the nature of sacrifice. Ask students if they have heard about any other cultures that practiced human sacrifice in the past? (religious wars, Biblical sacrifice, and individual sacrifice for a cause). Consider the purpose behind human sacrifice. Did they always have the common good as the ultimate goal? How are these examples the same and different from the Aztec sacrifices?

3. Discuss the lengths that a community might go to in sacrificing for the common good. What is the relationship between individual rights and community responsibility in this case? Were these people denied individual rights? Do you think their actions are justified?

4. Brainstorm a list of characteristics and motivations of someone who helps the community. Discuss whether these identified characteristics would accurately describe the Aztecs who performed human sacrifice. Would the practice of human sacrifice be an example of giving for the common good? Include the following points in the discussion: The Aztecs used mostly captives for their sacrifices. Victims were promised a place of highest honor in the after-life. They treated victims kindly with food, drink and a medication to help them relax before the sacrifice.

5. Display the following quotes to help guide student discussions about the meaning of the sacrifice.

"In this world it is not what we take up, but what we give up, that makes us rich." (Henry Ward Beecher)

"They never fail who die in a great cause." (Lord Byron)

"If you're outraged at conditions, then you can't possibly be free or happy until you devote all your time to changing them and do nothing but that. But you can't change anything if you want to hold onto a good job, a good way of life and avoid sacrifice." (Cesar Chavez)

"No sacrifice short of individual liberty, individual self-respect and individual enterprise is too great a price to pay for permanent peace." (Clark H. Minor)

"We can offer up much in the large, but to make sacrifices in little things is what we are seldom equal to." (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe)

6. Collectively generate a list of ways that entire nations and individual citizens sacrifice for the common good. Attempt to draw out ideas related to the sacrifices of soldiers, relief workers, medical workers, fire fighters, etc. Expand the discussion to include suicidal sacrifice and people who kill themselves for a religious cause.

- Talk about the motivations and costs of each type of sacrifice.
- Focusing on one example from the brainstormed list at a time, discuss the point in which the costs exceed the benefits of the sacrifice.
- Talk about the balance of individual rights and community responsibility in each example.
- Discuss when an act of sacrifice seems like a selfish rather than selfless act.
- Compare the acts of sacrifice of today with the acts of sacrifice by the Aztecs.
- Pass out **Attachment One: Small Sacrifices**. Brainstorm a list of small ways that individuals make sacrifices for others or the common good at school, at home and in the local community (letting your sister have the last yogurt, giving up study hall to help someone with a project, etc.). Students write down these examples and evaluate them for themselves. Students may add their own ideas later.

- Ask students to come up with one small way to make a sacrifice for the common good. They may use the examples on the worksheet or come up with a unique plan. Give them a time limit to carry out their small sacrifices.
- When the students make their sacrifices, they must write an evaluation of the act describing the action, the benefits, the opportunity costs, and whether the act was worth it.

VI. Extensions/Variations:

1. Discuss the lack of understanding and tolerance on the part of Cortes’ people. They judged the Aztecs harshly and referred to them as barbarians even though they had a rich culture and successful civilization. They didn't attempt to understand their culture or lifestyle but destroyed them instead. If the Spanish had been more open-minded and tolerant of diverse cultures, would the Aztec culture have evolved and survived?
2. Have students put the human sacrifices of the Aztecs on the worksheet (**Attachment One: Small Sacrifices**) and evaluate the benefits and opportunity costs.

VII. Assessment Ideas:

- The students write a paragraph evaluating the costs and benefits of their acts of sacrifice in comparison to the Aztec practice of human sacrifice. The paragraph should compare these two acts of sacrifice by demonstrating an understanding of the concepts of sacrifice, selflessness, opportunity costs and common good.

Act of Sacrifice	Benefits (to self and others)	Opportunity Costs (to self and others)	Are Benefits Greater than Costs?	Is the Act Selfless?