

**Topic:** Cultural Tradition

**Abstract:** My family moved to Mexico when I was two weeks old. We lived there until I was five and Spanish was my first language. It was my father's birthplace and we loved it there. We moved back to the US and tragedy befell my family shortly after. My father passed away and my mother was left to raise five children alone. I forgot Spanish as my family stopped speaking it at home and our schools wouldn't allow us to speak it. With the loss of my father I lost a sense of my culture and who I was. It was ultimately the relinquishment of my first language of Spanish which would interfere most with my sense of self. Years later as an adult I searched out my culture in various ways. After attempting mainstream religion I realized it wasn't for me or my family. Ancient traditional ways called to me and now I practice a Mexika lifestyle which includes danza Azteca and other aspects of indigenous practices.

**Key Words:** Family, Loss, Spanish, Language, Rebirth, Culture, Tradition, Father, Mexico, Mexika, Ancient, Catholicism

**Ethnic Designation:** Mexika

**Cultural Category:** Cultural Tradition: Practicing an indigenous Mexika lifestyle

Yo Soy Mexika!

I was born in California but my family and I moved to my father's birthplace of Mexico when I was hardly two weeks old. We stayed there for five years and lived a nice healthy happy life, together as a Mexicano familia. There was abuelito y abuelita, tío's y tía's, primos y primas y todo mas familia. There were fiestas, cumpleaños, y quinceañera's to attend and we ate comida Mexicana every day. My American born English speaking mother had to learn Spanish

in order to speak to me because that was the only language I understood. We moved back to the US when I was five and hardly two months later tragedy struck our family.

My father passed away suddenly and my mother was left alone to raise five small children with hardly any close relations to offer their support. Life was difficult for our family. Either we were too white to be Mexicanos or too Mexicano to be white. We didn't fit in anywhere. My brothers were beat up constantly by the American born Mexicans who called them wetbacks. The Mexicanos didn't consider them Mexican enough. One young Mexicano yanked the banner of La Virgen de Guadalupe from my teenage brother's hands during the sacred procession of La Virgen de Guadalupe. "Yo no soy Mexicano!" The white kids, well.., we were poor ghetto Mexicans to them. Probably the most drastic loss affecting me from the death of my father was my loss of my first language, Spanish.

I was held back in kindergarten until I could learn proper English because I only wanted to speak Spanish. My family stopped speaking Spanish altogether at home and in public. Speaking the native tongue of my beloved father and the country we loved was too painful for us. Every word reminded us of our terrible loss and the complete distributive chaos we were living in. At the time, growing up and being thrust into this strange vicious environment, with the loss of my protector and the subsequent emotional and mental withdrawal my mother suffered, my language of Spanish was the only link I had left to my culture. Eventually, the language faded away just like the memories of my father and our cherished loved homeland of Mexico.

Many years later I would dissect my childhood and only be able to dredge up agonizing emotions and painful memories. The most painful for me was the fact that I couldn't remember my father. As the youngest, I was the only one who didn't remember him, or the wonderful life

we lived in Mexico. I also was the only one who lost my native language. I felt the intense need to reconnect myself with my people, my culture, and my heritage. I needed a stronger connection than that of just my personal association to the Mexican race. I ate Mexican food, had Mexican friends, my spouse is half Yaqui (themselves descendents of Toltec's). I attempted to conform myself to the dominate religion in Mexico, Catholicism. I was baptized a catholic in Mexico as a baby, which was the custom. My parents were raised catholic. But I was not a practicing catholic. The church had offered my mom some help when my father passed so I decided it was worth a try. So I attempted to live that religious lifestyle with my own family.

My children received their rites of sacrament and we conformed, or tried to. But after awhile, it got old real quick. The up and downs, sit and stand, church offerings and phony smiles, Hail Mary's and repentance, eternal hell if we didn't confess our sins and babies in limbo. But what really drew me to seek more into my own spirituality was the fact that I begin to experience a lot of negative episodes and contradictory people associated with the church. While I went for some sort of spiritual healing, some sense of connection to my culture and my past, I left feeling angry and disconnected from what was supposed to be a big cultural aspect of my Mexican people. This lifestyle was not meant for me.

But then, as they say, the stars aligned and the ancestors awakened in me a deep conscious connection into my past. Conch shells sounded into each of the four directions and drumbeats heard a thousand years ago echoed in my soul. The sacred sage wafted through my nose into my deepest psyche and carried with it my energy and my prayers to the creator and to the sun, to mother earth and my ancient bloodlines. Danza Azteca and the ancient lifestyle of my predecessors became my own.

This indigenous Mexika lifestyle is growing slowly as others like me, including those separated from Mexico for many generations and those who were born and raised in Mexico, are searching for our own ties to our cultural identity's. There are many opinions of how to live a traditional Mexika lifestyle or how authentic danza Azteca really is. It is true that many aspects of this ancient practice were lost through assimilation of our peoples to Catholicism by the Spaniards. But not all of it was lost. In fact, many important factors remain. Thanks to our ingenious forefathers, who risked death to secretly keep traditions alive, what we practice now is the evolution of what they practiced then. Some steps were lost and replaced, some songs forgotten, some rites lost forever with the attempted eradication of a cultural practice. But many of the customs we partake in are the same that they did then. With my own desire to learn more, as I am very much a novice, I have learned not to let the negative comments or personal opinions about my acquired practices deflect me from my ultimate goal.

As a part of the danzante community, there is positive energy to be found everywhere. It is shared and spread in the danza circle and forms a flow of positivity, giving needed vitality to those outside the circle. There is a sense of dignity and respect carried by those who practice these ancient rites. I found myself, at one time, floundering in a pool of my own disatchament from my cultural identity. Now, I find myself aligning myself with the ways of my ancestors. I wish to attain the histories of my people from the land of Anahuac. I hope to be conscious of the knowledge of my people and adopted it as my own and that of my family.

I speak "poco" Spanish now. I'm slowly learning over time. It hasn't come back to me like I wish it would. But that's okay. My language died with my father. It can be reborn but now I don't have the same desire to learn it as much. I will learn it, and become fluent once again, eventually but now I feel pulled in a more important direction.

I plan on the rebirth of my ancestral language of Nahua or Nahuatl. Gradually I am familiarizing myself with the language. Overtime, as I learn, I teach my children. We say simple words here and there. It is completely different than Spanish or English. That's what makes it special, I guess. The language has a history, a connection. It is my connection, my rebirth into my almost lost culture. Language, danza, rites, symbolic rituals, positive energy, mother earth, the sun, the creator, family, these are aspects of my life that are my culture. Now these cultural practices have been renewed in my own children.

A few months ago my mother reflected to me that my father was proud of his "Aztec" heritage. My desire to connect to him was the driving force that brought me to his roots and mine. These are roots that are far reaching.

Just new to the life stage of walking, my youngest daughter is already an emerging danzante. Her little body sways to the rhythm of the drums, her little chubby feet step lightly to the beat, her chachayotes releasing their sweet melody with each footfall. My little *cihuapilli* (daughter) was recently admitted into my Capulli community in a traditional Aztec ceremony. She is now a part of the Capulli and initiated in a rite of passage harkening back to ancient days. As I raised my beautiful daughter high in the air and presented "La *Kautli*" to our Mexika familia, I could feel the connection to my culture I so longed for and through her and my other children, our cultural tradition will live on. Yo soy Mexika!