



CULTURAL HERITAGE OF MEXICA BY MEANS OF PHOTOGRAPHIC PROJECT: AFTER DEATH

*Maria Fernanda Paredes Amador, Digital Art student,
University of Guanajuato, Mexico*

*Natalia Gurieva, Ph.D., professor in the Department of Art,
University of Guanajuato, Mexico*

The *Mexica*, also known as the Aztecs, are indeed a significant part of Mexican identity and history. Although they are often used synonymously, the Aztecs and the Mexica were not the same people: the former were the inhabitants of the mythical Aztlán; the latter, a group that separated from them. The Mexica were known for their advanced knowledge in agriculture, engineering, astronomy, and arts. They built impressive cities like Tenochtitlan, which is now modern-day Mexico City. Religion played a crucial role in *Mexica* society, with a complex pantheon of gods and elaborate rituals, including human sacrifices. This aspect of their culture often generates a mix of fascination and horror among observers. The *Mexica*, like many ancient Mesoamerican civilizations, had a complex and multifaceted relationship with death that can be characterized as a "cult of death". Death held significant religious, social, and cultural importance in Aztec society, shaping various aspects of their beliefs and practices. The *Mexica* understood death in a different way than today, however, it is a fundamental part of Mexican culture and that is why we seek to represent it through art, creating a fusion between artistic makeup, photography, and audio.

Creating an artistic project to learn about the culture of the *Mexica* can be both educational and rewarding. Objective of the project is to take a photographic journey and represent four paradises of *Mexica* culture.

The mythology of the Mexica is an essential aspect of Mexican identity. Unlike the Christian worldview, which believes in a heaven, a hell, and a purgatory as destination places for souls that leave this earthly plane, the Mexica – before the Spanish invasion – believed that there were four possible destinations where one could give rest to your existence. To none of these places did one go to suffer or condemn one's soul but, on the contrary, after waking up from this dream called life, it was the place destined for eternal rest.

There are four destinations to which the souls had to reach: **Tlalocan**: Tláloc, the God of rain was the one who ruled this place. For the deceased to access this place, his death had to be related to water. Such as dying from drowning, from lightning, or from diseases such as fluid retention (fig. 1); **Omeyocan** that was the place destined for the souls of the warriors who died in combat, the captives who were sacrificed and the women who died during childbirth since they were considered brave people (fig. 2); **Mictlán**: the one who ruled this place was Mictlantecuhtli, those who died naturally were sent to this place (fig. 3); **Chichihualcuahco**: babies who died prematurely were sent here; there was a tree that had the function of being the mother of the children and fed them until they were reincarnated (fig. 4).



Tlalocan. This realm was ruled by Tlaloc, the Aztec god of rain and fertility. Souls who died in ways related to water, such as drowning, lightning strikes, or diseases associated with fluid retention, were believed to journey to Tlalocan. It was envisioned as a paradise with abundant water and agricultural fertility, where the souls could live in peace and abundance for eternity.

Omeyocan. This destination was reserved for warriors who died in combat (including sacrificial victims), women who died during childbirth, and other brave individuals. It was considered a place of honor and glory, where the souls of the brave could continue to serve the gods in battle. Omeyocan was associated with the highest levels of the afterlife, where heroes could bask in eternal glory.



Figure 1 – Representing of **Tlalocan** (Source: own elaboration)



Figure 2 – Representing of **Omeyocan** (Source: own elaboration)

Mictlán. Mictlán was the realm ruled by Mictlantecuhtli and Mictecacihuatl, the lord and lady of the underworld. Souls who died of natural causes or illnesses were believed to journey to Mictlán. It was a dark and desolate place, often depicted as a cold and inhospitable landscape. However, it was not necessarily a place of eternal punishment; rather, it was where the souls would undergo various trials and challenges before reaching their final destination.



Chichihualcuahco. This destination was specifically for babies who died prematurely or in childbirth. It was depicted as a nurturing and comforting place, where a sacred tree served as a mother figure, providing nourishment and care to the souls of the infants until they were ready to be reincarnated or join other realms of the afterlife.



Figure 3 – Representing of **Mictlan** (Source: own elaboration)



Figure 4 – Representing of **Chichihualcuahco** (Source: own elaboration)

In conclusion, we seek to represent the paradises in a visual way complemented with a unique sound composition, designed to immerse viewers in each of the atmospheres of the different spaces. These four destinations illustrate the diverse and nuanced beliefs of the Aztecs regarding the journey of the soul after death, reflecting their complex understanding of life, death, and the cosmic order. This project helps to the audience explore the culture and spirituality of the *Mexicas*, as well as foster understanding of the beliefs that have influenced the cultural identity of Mexico throughout the centuries.

References

1. Florescano, E. (1990). Mito e historia en la memoria nahua. *Historia mexicana*, 607-661.
2. Soustelle, J. En torno a la cosmovision Mexica: vieas ideas, nuevas hipotesis. *la quête du cinquième*, 309.