

Decolonial Pedagogy – Teaching the Aztec and the Spanish Conquest of Mexico to Y8

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The conversation in education around the need for a decolonised curriculum has intensified recently, especially within British universities (Charles, 2019), but I would argue that this movement has yet to truly find its way into secondary school classrooms. A more practical understanding of decoloniality is needed in secondary education to help curriculum leaders and teachers answer the calls of academics and activists.

In this paper, I will present some work on the Spanish conquest of Mexico, which I planned for Year 8. While not a traditional topic in the curriculum, it is one where many of the principles of decolonial pedagogy are relevant. It is my hope that in presenting this work, I can expose some of the techniques that history teachers can use to bring decoloniality to the history curriculum. This unit fits into a wider project to “decolonise” the Key Stage 3 curriculum (see appendix 1), which I hope to present in future papers.

My aim was to introduce multiple perspectives to my students and challenge a Eurocentric teaching of the Aztec. Much of my initial thinking was based on my readings of Edward Said, who warned so articulately about viewing other cultures from purely Western lenses. Said describes the western notion of the orient; a site of deep and “recurring images of the Other” (Said, 1979 p.10). In creating these sites, Europe has defined itself as contrasting, and ultimately superior to places with differing cultures, beliefs, and aesthetics.

In the case of the Aztec, it is all too easy for British teachers to present the history exclusively through the lens of the Conquistadores. students should be taught why

Cortes and his men found themselves amongst the Aztec in 1513. To bring these perspectives to the classroom, I tried to help students view the world of the 1500s as polycentric, introducing an Aztec lens to the enquiry and encouraging students to consider the long-term consequences of colonialism in contemporary Mexican society.

A Polycentric World

Walter Mignolo has observed that the world of the 1500s was polycentric, containing several co-existing civilizations (2011). I believe that students must grasp this point clearly, to allow them to see that Europe was not the only global site of technology and culture. While some of groundwork for this idea was laid prior to teaching the Aztec, by studying different empires from antiquity to the 1500s including Benin, China and the Arab Empire, it was very important that students viewed the Aztec as coexisting with Europe and as its own centre of culture before Europeans landed in the Yucatan. To help students see this, we introduced the polycentric world (figures 1a-d), which helped challenged the traditional, colonial European gaze. This learning also disrupted the highly problematic notion that countries were “discovered” by European explorers, favouring an understanding that these locations were already populated by indigenous peoples, nations, and empires. (Figure 2).

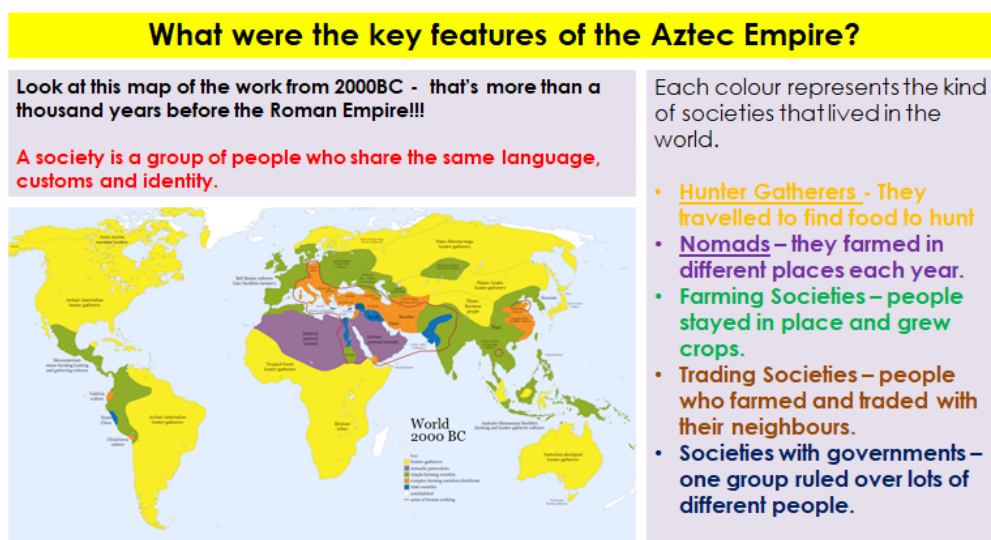


Figure 1 - Establishing the existence of multiple co-existing worlds.

What were the key features of the Aztec Empire?

Which parts of the world already had **Farming Societies (people stayed in place and grew crops)** in 2000BC?



Figure 1b – Establishing the existence of multiple co-existing worlds.

What were the key features of the Aztec Empire?

By 1500, many of these societies had developed into Empires. (eg China, The Islamic Empire). There were also other societies all over the world (eg Benin)

But, because many of these people travelled by land, many of these Empires did not know each other existed.

Today, we are going to learn about an Empire from Central America called the **Aztec Empire**.



Figure 1c – Situating the Aztec in the polycentric world.

What were the key features of the Aztec Empire?

Did Europeans know about the Aztec empire in 1500?

Did the Aztec Empire know about Europeans in 1500?

Why not?



Figure 1d – Student discussion to emphasise that the Aztec world was independent from the West.

What happened when Spanish Explorers met the Aztecs?

Cristopher Columbus' main aim was to find a shortcut to China and India. He hope to find a quicker way to trade between Asia by sea, instead of using the **Silk Roads**.

What does this suggest about Columbus' knowledge of the world?

That's right!! Columbus did not know that there was a whole continent, between Europe and Asia!!!



What happened when Spanish Explorers met the Aztecs?

So, instead of landing in India, Columbus had actually landed in the Americas.

There, Columbus met indigenous people called the **Taino**. Columbus found gold and precious stones, which the **Taino** wore as jewellery.



**Some people say
Columbus discovered
America – why is this not
accurate?**

Figure 3 – Deconstructing colonial discourses of discovery.

Disrupting Shallow Diversity

When writing about “the orient,” Said talked of the orient as “an idea, or a creation with no corresponding reality” (Said, 1979, p.14). This is a constant issue with teaching “diverse topics”. In our case, as British teachers have little knowledge on the Aztecs without the European gaze, the temptation is to teach through common, easily accessible, western accounts of the period such as Hernan Cortes’ diary and letters, or sources by other conquistadores like Bernal Díaz del Castillo. In addition, a principal archive on Aztec culture, politics and aesthetics is the Aztec Codices, written by a range of Spanish and indigenous authors shortly after the fall of the Aztec Empire. Notable among these is the Florentine Codex by Bernardino de Sahagún, which provides a written and visual record on the Aztec religion but only in retrospect, and from the point of view of someone who considered the Aztec faith to be heretical. Therefore, providing students with a sense of the Aztec Empire as its own distinct world, which had almost no contact with Europeans prior to 1519, means relying on artefacts, oral histories, and traditions that predate the Spanish colonisation. Through images of surviving Aztec constructions, artefacts relating to religion and everyday life, alongside examples of Aztec writing and mathematics, students can begin to build up a sense of the rich and complex nature of the Aztec

Empire on its own terms rather than through the gaze of a European coloniser (Figures 3a-c). While some might argue that this is a trivial step, it is a habit that teachers must from to consistently decolonise their approaches to non-European societies. One the one hand, this approach forces us to investigate cultures in more depth to seek out indigenous sources but in addition, this helps ensure a diversity of perspectives in the curriculum.

What were the key features of the Aztec Empire?

Today, very little of the Aztec Empire survives. Historians need to use a small amount of **sources** to learn about the Aztec people and their society.

What can you infer about the Aztec Empire from source A?

I can infer that the Aztec Empire was.....

- *built using stone*
- *build tall buildings*



Source A – An Aztec Pyramid, now found in Modern day Mexico.

Figure 3a– Using sources to investigate Aztec construction.

What were the key features of the Aztec Empire?

Today, very little of the Aztec Empire survives. Historians need to use a small amount of **sources** to learn about the Aztec people and their society?

What can you infer about the **scientific knowledge** of the Aztec?

I can infer that the Aztec had knowledge of.....

- *Science*
- *Craft*
- *Religion*



Source B – An Aztec Calendar, carved into stone.

Figure 3b– Using sources to study Aztec Religion, Science and craft

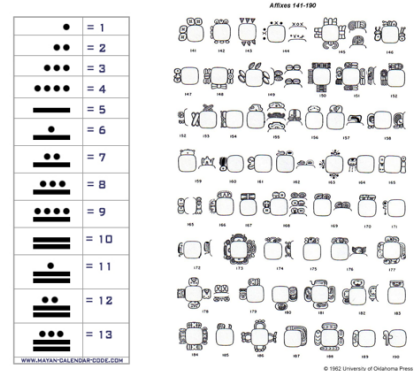
What were the key features of the Aztec Empire?

Today, very little of the Aztec Empire survives. Historians need to use a small amount of **sources** to learn about the Aztec people and their society.

What can you infer about the language?

I can infer that the Aztec

- *Had written language*
- *Had a number system (maths)*



Source C and D – The Aztec numbers and alphabet

Figure 3c – Investigating Aztec language and numbers

In addition, by revealing to students that there are a limited range of sources by the Aztec themselves, a conversation that examined how colonialism can damage or destroy the culture of the colonised. This helped students reflect further on the nature of colonialism both in Mexico and throughout the world. Furthermore, we then began to critically discuss the modern impact, the destruction of sources has had on Mexico by showing how Aztec culture survives through oral traditions and Spanish sources but also in European museums (Figures 5a-c).

How much has Cortes' conquest of the Aztec impacted modern Mexico?

Traditional clothing, such as the battle dress of Eagle and Jaguar warriors, are often copied from Spanish sources.



A Spanish image of Aztec Eagle Warriors



A Modern Aztec Eagle warrior

Figure 5a – Discussing the complexity of preserving indigenous culture through oral history and colonial sources.

How much has Cortes' conquest of the Aztec impacted modern Mexico?

Aztec cookery, which is still eaten in Mexico, is understood by a combination of word of mouth, and Spanish sources.



Tamales, a traditional Aztec dish.



A Spanish image of Aztec women making Tamales



Indigenous Mexicans, making Tamales. The recipes are passed down through families.

Figure 5b – Discussing the complexity of preserving indigenous culture through oral history and colonial sources.

How much has Cortes' conquest of the Aztec impacted modern Mexico?

In October of this year, the Mexican government asked the Spanish Government and the Pope to apologise for the way the Spanish Empire, and Catholic priests, treated the Aztec. They also asked that:

- The Pope return manuscripts of Aztec culture to Mexico.
- The King of Spain recognises that Spain was wrong to conquer the Aztec Empire.
- That the Spanish government should discuss giving the Mexican government money to make up for the raw materials such as gold and silver that Spain took from Mexico.



Why do you think Mexico has asked for the return of these artefacts?

Do you think the Pope and the King of Spain should apologise or return manuscripts and money? Why/Why not?

Figure 5c – Approaching contemporary debates around reparations and repatriating artefacts.

Through these discussions, students began to see the Aztec world as more than just separate from Europe, but also distinct. Furthermore, we started to question the impact Europe had on Aztec culture both at the time of the conquest, but also in contemporary Mexico.

Critiquing Colonial Discourse

An important purpose of a decolonial pedagogy is to give students a way to critique the actions of colonisers, and the narratives that have developed to justify, apologise for, and in some cases, further coloniality.

Jared Diamond asserted that “history followed different courses for different peoples because of differences among peoples' environments, not because of biological differences among peoples themselves” (1997 p.25). This view clarifies that when civilizations such as the Aztec and the Spanish met, the factors which determined the outcome of these interactions scarcely more than luck. Yet, a Eurocentric explanation of the Spanish victory over the Aztec is often focused on the inferiority of Aztec weapons, which could not defeat the hardened steel of the Spaniards. Indeed,

Aztec weaponry and warfare did not ultimately defeat the Spanish, although it is often overlooked that many rebel armies from within the Aztec empire such as the Confederacy of Tlaxcala fought with the Spanish, more than doubling the numbers of Conquistadores. In addition, smallpox, which decimated the Aztec people was also a huge factor.

However, the colonial narrative encourages us to believe the Aztec were primitive in comparison to the Europeans. Armed with western discourse on the clash of European colonial powers and the indigenous, students are often inclined to argue for superior Spanish technology as a factor for the Aztec fall. In fact, the Spanish had *different* technology, rather than better technology. For example, students should be challenged with the scale of Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital, which was at least four times more populous than London, built of stone, with a temple at its centre which would have dwarfed the proudest European cathedrals. So, while technology was a reason for the Spanish defeat of the Aztec, it is not evidence of Aztec primitivism or Spanish modernity.

I also challenged students to consider the motivations for the Spanish conquest of Mexico. Why, for example, did the Portuguese empire choose not to conquer Benin in West Africa? Why, did the Dutch Empire choose not to attack Japan, upon first contact in 1634? The answers lie in judgements made by European colonial powers about whether they *could* overwhelm the indigenous cultures they found. Elsewhere in our curriculum, students learn that the Portuguese chose to trade with Benin because the work of Benin's craftspeople could not be easily reproduced and due to the slowly increasing supply of enslaved peoples, captured in the mainland, and traded at the coast. In Asia, Japan was far too politically robust and martially capable to justify an attempt at invasion by the Portuguese and Dutch, who favoured diplomacy to secure their profits (Olusoga, 2018). The Aztec, on the other hand, had advanced buildings and culture, but presided over a politically fragile empire that could be destabilised and an army that with help, the Spanish could ultimately defeat (see figure 5). These are examples of how perspectives can help students move to critique colonial discourse through a decolonial approach to the curriculum.

Critiquing Colonisation

Colonialism weighs heavily upon contemporary American cultures. Not only did colonialism repress “specific beliefs, ideas, images, symbols or knowledge”, but it replaced them with the “imposition of the use of the rulers’ own patterns of expression, and of their beliefs and images with reference to the supernatural” (Quijano, 2007 p.169). So, although decolonisation has taken place as a physical process, it has also “mutated into decoloniality”, meaning that in the present, coloniality is an “epistemic rather than a geographical issue.” (Mignolo, 2011 pp. 53-54). Therefore, another vital perspective in our curriculum was that of a colony in the postcolonial era.

In Mexico, colonialism has left a deep scar. Indigenous Aztec languages such as Nahuatl are still spoken by an estimated 1.45 million people (INEGI, 2000), but Spanish remains the most spoken language by far. Descendants of the Aztec must rely on Spanish sources, and oral histories to understand some lost aspects of indigenous culture. The colonial caste system that divided *Creoles* (descended from the Spanish), *Mestizo* (mixtures of Spanish and Indigenous) and the Indigenous but also allocated privilege along racial lines remains entrenched in contemporary Mexico (Mercado, 2017). Today, lighter skinned Mexicans have higher educational outcomes, are wealthier, and are likelier to have access to running water than darker skinned Mexicans (Zizumbo-Colunga, 2017). For me, it was critical that after studying the Aztec and the story of colonisation, students considered the impact of this history on the contemporary so that students could assess modern complicity in coloniality and consider a modern indigenous perspective (figures 6a-c).

This process has led me and my students into new, interesting, and often challenging conversations about the complexity of colonialism and the nature of coloniality. In addition to being the most nuanced conversations on imperialism that I have had with students of this age group, they have set the tone for a deeper, more critical, and broader exploration of Empires, colonialism and coloniality.

What was the impact of the Spanish Empire of Mexico?		
Decide if the evidence about the Spanish Empire of Mexico is related to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Society (the people who live in Mexico) • Religion • Economy 		
The main raw materials of Mexico were silver and gold, which was very valuable to the Spanish Empire. Spanish miners forced indigenous people to work in the mines for long hours and low pay.	In the Spanish Empire, the indigenous people such as the Aztec were treated as second class citizens. At first, some Aztec nobles stayed in power, but gradually, this changed. By the 1700s, the descendants of the Aztecs did not have the vote and were not able to hold important positions in government.	The Spanish Empire brought enslaved people from Africa to work in Mexico. These people were treated as less than human. When Spain abolished slavery in 1811, slaves were freed, although they still found themselves at the bottom of society on very low wages.
As soon as the Spanish conquered Mexico, they forced people to convert to Christianity. Today, 9 out of 10 Mexicans are Catholic and Catholicism is the official religion of the country.	Other land in Mexico was used to grow plants such as cocaine, tobacco, and cotton. Plantations were worked on by forced labourers or enslaved Africans. The cash crops were exported to European by Spanish traders.	In the early days of the Spanish Conquest, the Spanish destroyed evidence of the Aztec religion. This included religious artefacts, temples and the murder of Aztec priests who refused to convert. Today, people who wish to follow the Aztec religion must follow traditions passed on by word of mouth or read about the religion from Spanish sources.
The official language of Mexico was Nahuatl during the Aztec Empire. After the Aztec, Spanish became the official language of Mexico. Education, law, business, and politics were conducted in Spanish. This meant that Nahuatl became less and less common. Although it is still spoken in Mexico, it is only the first language of 15% of the population and still not taught in most schools.	While there are still Aztec temples in Mexico, they are all in ruins. The remains of Temple Mayor, the main temple of Tenochtitlan, are buried under a cathedral that the Spanish built on top of it.	The Spanish expanded mining in Mexico over the years, cutting down forests and destroying indigenous towns to build more and more mines. Now, much of the silver is gone although most of it was exported out of Mexico by the Spanish.

Figures 6a - Reflecting on the impact of Spanish colonialism on people, culture, and the economy.

How much has Cortes conquest of the Aztec impacted modern Mexico?

Task – Read about some of the legacies of the Spanish Conquest of the Aztec and write a reflection on the following points:

1. *How do you think the descendants of the Aztec feel about their culture and how it changed after the Spanish conquest?*
2. *Why is it important for the ancestors of the Aztec to learn as much as they can about their ancestors' culture?*

The Spanish Empire	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mexico became a colony of Mexico after Cortes. By the end of the 17th century, over 750,000 Spanish settlers had move to Mexico.• The Spanish used native peoples for forced labour.• Descendants of the Aztec were treated as second class citizens. As a result of this, lighter skinned Mexicans, descended from the Spanish occupy positions of wealth and power in society. Darker- skinned decedents of the Aztec are still the victims of racism today.
Lost Aztec Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Two years after the arrival of Cortes, the Spanish had conquered the Aztec. The Spanish forced the Aztec people to convert to Christianity. Aztec schools were abolished, many religious sites were destroyed, along with almost all written sources created by the Aztec people. Although some modern Mexicans still practice the Aztec religion, a lot of knowledge is lost forever.• Although Nahuatl is still spoken in Mexico, most Mexicans speak Spanish. The number of speakers of Nahuatl is declining, and some fear it will die out soon.

Reflections:

Figures 6b - Reflecting on the legacy of Spanish colonialism.

How much has Cortes' conquest of the Aztec impacted modern Mexico?

Día de Muertos (Day of the Dead) is a national holiday when Mexicans visit the graves of their ancestors.

It is a mixture of Aztec religion and Christianity.

What can you infer about how the Spanish Empire changed Mexican culture?

I can infer that.....



Figures 6c – Investigating the influence of Spanish Colonisation on Culture

Conclusion

For Jeffrey Boakye, the lack of diversity in his education taught “the myths of Empire, erased the unpalatable truths of this country’s colonial past” (Boakye, 2020 n.p.). If history does not speak to members of minoritized groups and their perspectives in history, then the curriculum does indeed need to become “a site of decolonisation” (Ibid.). While I agree with Boakye, I argue that we must take the idea of decolonisation further, into an act of decoloniality, a process which involves exposing, and unpicking the prevalent narratives of western modernity. In addition, these decolonial acts must take our students across the globe, to deepen their understanding of Europe’s impact on history.

My hope is that this work draws practical conclusions from theory, which will allow decoloniality to flourish within the classroom. While the development of a complete toolkit for decoloniality in the classroom is far beyond the scope of this work, I hope that the presentation of my lessons on the Aztec and the Spanish conquest of Mexico can lay a foundation for a wider discussion into the classroom techniques of a decolonial pedagogy.

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Appendix – Y8 History Curriculum

YEAR 8 CURRICULUM							
Theme(s): Empire, colonialism, exploration, and migration							
Autumn 1		Autumn 2		Spring 1	Spring 2	Summer 1	Summer 2
TOPIC OVERVIEW Empire Case Studies: Focus on factors that explain rise and fall of Empires. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rome • Benin • 1st Chinese Empire • Islamic Empire Case Study on the Silk Roads: Showing Economic factors that connected Europe, Middle East, and Asia. Focus on cultural exchange aspects.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The European Renaissance • Early European Exploration • The World in 1500s (Polycentric!!) • Case Study – The Aztec Empire (Rise, Fall, Culture) • The Spanish Conquest of Mexico- 1519-1521 • The Impact of the Spanish Empire in Mexico • Early British colonisation (Americas, Africa, and India) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Africa in the 1500s – Return to Benin, transcontinental trade and economy, natural wealth. • The Transatlantic slave trade (origins, triangle trade). • Plantations in the Americas (conditions, enslaved culture in plantations) • The abolition of Slavery (Factors: Activism, Economy, Rebellion) • Critiques of Abolition – continuing slave trade and legacy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The impact of Industrialism on Britain and the British Empire (BE). • The growth of the BE and reason for (power, money, trade) • Scale and diversity of 1800s BE. • Case studies on colonial experience of indigenous peoples (India, Australia, Ghana, Hong Kong) • Northern England – role in Empire. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outbreak of WWI (link to European colonises) • Diversity of soldiers in WWI – link to Empire. • Migration and citizenship within the British empire – 1900 • Definitions of Britishness in 1900. 	Post WWII migration to Britain – reasons and treatment of migrants. Decolonisation case Studies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • India (including Partition) • Jamaica • Ghana • Hong Kong Britishness project: Students explore their own identity and consider what it means to be British. -Links to racism and critique of race-based understanding of British identity.
KEY QUESTIONS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is an Empire and why do nations build them? • Why do Empires become powerful? • Why do Empires collapse? • How did the Silk roads impact the World in the Middle Ages? 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why did Europeans begin to Explore the oceans in the 1500s? • Who lived in the world in the 1500s? • Describe the key features of the Aztec Empire • Why and how did Cortes conquer the Aztec empire? • What were the consequences of the Spanish Empire on Mexico? 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was Africa like in the 1500s? • Why did Europeans start trading in enslaved peoples in the 1500s? • What was the transatlantic slave Trade? • Why did Britain abolish the transatlantic slave trader? • Did Britain <u>really</u> abolish the transatlantic slave trade? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why did the British Empire expand rapidly in 1800s? • How did Britain keep control of the Empire? • How did Britain benefit from the Empire? • Were there colonies of the British Empire in the UK (Yorkshire)? • How were colonised people treated by the British Empire? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did Empire cause World war? • Who was “we” in WWI? • How did peoples move around the British Empire in 1900? • Who was considered British in 1900? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why did migration to Britain increase after WWI? • How and why did the British Empire End? • Is Decolonisation really finished? • What does it mean to British today?