Ancient Aztec Religion

Ancient Aztec religion was a complex interaction of gods, dates, directions and colors. It seems that most of the preoccupation in the religion had to do with fear of the nature, and a fear of the end of the world.

By the time the Mexica's Empire (Mexica is the proper name for the Aztecs) was at its height, the political and religious systems were in close interaction. The actions of the ruling classes and common people can be best understood if we look way back to the Mexica understanding of the creation, or rather creations, of the world. Because the religion was a mixture from various peoples, there are variations.

In the Beginning

According to ancient Aztec religion, it took the gods 5 tries to create the world. These attempts were foiled because of infighting among the gods themselves. After he was knocked from his exalted position by rivals, the first creator, Tezcatlipoca, turned into a jaguar and destroyed the world. Under similar circumstances, the world was created and then destroyed with wind, and then two floods.

Each time a creator-god would take a turn being the sun. Finally, the gods had a council, and decided one of them would have to sacrifice himself to be the new sun. Nanauatl, a lowly, humble god became the sun, but there was a problem - he wasn't moving. The gods realized that they all must sacrifice themselves so that humans could live. The god Ehecatl sacrificed the others, and a mighty wind arose to move the sun at last.

This was no free sacrifice, however. Not only would the people have to help this weak sun to keep moving, they would also be responsible to repay the sacrifice. The world remained in a precarious position!

Once the sun was dealt with, the world had to be recreated. Quetzalcoatl (meaning feathered serpent) was the one who would create humans. Of course, people had been created several times before, so Quetzalcoatl descended into the underworld to retrieve their bones. He tripped as he fled, and the bones shattered into different sized pieces, which is why people are all different sizes. By adding his own blood to the mix, people came to life.

The calendar and the sun

The ancient Aztec religion was highly focused on keeping nature in balance. One false step could lead to natural disaster. The weak sun could stop moving. In the sky was a constant battle between light and darkness, a battle that would someday be lost.

Huitzilopochtli (Hummingbird of the South) was the warrior sun (either the sun god or the one who fights for the sun god, Tonatiuh (the name given to Nanauatl)). Huitzilopochtli (or Tonatiuh) needed blood sacrifice in order to win the battle against darkness. Either there would be ritual blood-letting, or actual people would be sacrificed. Those sacrificed would rise to fight with him. And so human sacrifices became more and more common in Mexico.
QUESTIONS TO ACCOMPANY READING

1. What were the two main purposes of the Aztec religion?

2. In what other culture have we seen multiple efforts to create the world and/or humans?

3. What might be the significance of a FLOOD in creation stories (of all religions)?

4. Why did people “owe” the gods, according to the Aztec religion?

5. To what extent is Aztec religion different from other religions we have studied (for example, in Southeast Asia)?