

Search for Aztec homeland clouded in myth, politics

By Alistair Bell
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MEXCALTITAN, Mexico, – The mythical homeland of Mexico's Aztecs – an island known as Aztlan – has eluded historians for centuries, and the quest to find it has become shrouded in political spin and scholarly speculation.

Like the lost Atlantis and Camelot, Aztlan may or may not have existed, but fervent believers have sought it from the desert of Utah to a mangrove swamp in western Mexico.

Academics agree that the Aztecs, a warlike tribe with a passion for human sacrifice, wandered the badlands of central Mexico for years before founding what is now Mexico City around 1325 and then forging the greatest empire of the ancient Americas.

But the original habitat of the people whose history and symbols are still invoked by modern Mexico remains a mystery.

Aztec legend says little about Aztlan, apart from that it was a small island on a lake inhabited by herons north of Mexico City. If it is ever found, archeologists do not expect to discover much in the way of treasure or ruins there.

The small western state of Nayarit, long neglected by the federal government, declared itself the "cradle of the Mexicans" in the early 1990s based on an old theory that the marshy island of Mexcaltitan was in fact Aztlan.

Little stirs on the mosquito-infested islet nestled in a salt water lagoon on the Pacific coast.

An expected tourism boom to the state has mostly failed to materialize and the islanders still scratch a living from fishing for shrimp and lobsters.

"No serious archeological study has ever been done in Mexcaltitan," said Jesus Jauregui, an expert in western Mexico at the National Institute of Anthropology and History.

"Aztlan is a mythical place, not a historical one,"

he said.

SPEAKING SAME TONGUE

Try telling that to the growing number of Mexican immigrants in the United States for whom the idea that Aztlan was in Utah or Colorado has become a matter of doctrine.

"Mexican Americans are very interested in it because it gives them identity as an ethnic group," said Armando Solorzano, ethnic studies professor at the University of Utah.

He said that if the Aztecs indeed came from what is now the western United States, as some linguistic studies suggest, then the millions of mostly illegal Mexican migrants there could argue that they are not just undocumented workers but descendants of the original inhabitants who have come home.

"With this massive wave of immigration from Mexico now, the immigrants are saying, 'We are returning to Aztlan,' so there is a lot of political misunderstanding and conflict," Solorzano said.

Many Mexicans still resent the United States taking much of the U.S. Southwest in the 1846-48 Mexican-American war.

Perhaps the best clue to the origins of the Aztecs is the language.

The Aztec tongue is widely recognized by linguists as being part of the Uto-Aztecan family and related to the language of the Ute Indians of Utah as well as the Hopi and Comanche.

The discovery in recent years of a cave painting in Sego Canyon, Utah that appears to be a deity also seen on a famous Aztec stone calendar boosts the theory of a former Aztec presence in the United States, Solorzano said.

Seven caves found on Antelope Island in Utah may also tie in with an Aztec story that the tribe passed through a place of seven caves, the fabled Chicomoztoc, he said.

But all this does not prove that Aztlan was in the southwest United States, only that the Aztecs may have spent time there on their wanderings before departing for Mexico City some 1,700 miles to the south.

"This is one point of departure. Nayarit might be another one. Some people say they also migrated from California," Solorzano said. "There is another belief that the Aztecs came from Florida," he said .

ISLAND HOME

Mexcaltitan, home to 1,800 people in a mangrove swamp, is now losing ground to U.S. claims to be the Aztecs' homeland.

Even the curator of the island's tiny museum acknowledges that the local version of the Aztlan story may be fiction.

"The issue of where the mythical Aztlan is has been thrashed about a lot. They haven't located it definitively," said curator Lilia Apocada.

The island was first tapped as Aztlan by a 19th century Mexican historian and given credence by National Geographic magazine in a 1968 article.

Mexcaltitan's tiny museum houses some pre-Hispanic pottery but no evidence that it was the place from where the Aztecs took their first step into the history books.

Locals are more concerned about shrimp fishing and preparations for the annual festival when the island's population triples for a few days of dancing and heavy drinking at the end of June.

"They say the Aztecs passed through here. Well, I didn't see them," said fish gutter Abelardo Ramos, 38.

The doors of houses are often left open in Mexcaltitan, unlike in crime-ridden areas of Mexico, and families laze in hammocks, eating seafood or drinking cold beer.

"Whether it is the real Aztlan or not, people enjoy this place anyway," said museum curator Apocada.

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