

AZTLÁN
Essays on the Chicano Homeland

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people's sense of nation and destiny. The artists, like the priests and shamans of other tribes, express spiritual awareness and potential, and it is the "expression" of the group's history, identity, and purpose which I label the "naming ceremony." In the ancient world this expression of identity and purpose was contained in the epic; thus, we read Homer to understand the character of the Greeks.

Various circumstances create the need for national or tribal definition and unity. The group may acquire cohesion and a feeling of nationhood in times of threat, whether the threat be physical (war or exploitation) or a perceived loss of tribal unity. Group existence may also be threatened by assimilationist tendencies, which were a real threat experienced by the Chicano community in the 1960s. A time of adventure and conquest, or the alliance of political interests may also bring nations to self-definition. Most notably, times of heightened spiritual awareness of the group's relationship to the gods create this sense of purpose and destiny in the community. Usually these times are marked by a renaissance in the arts, because the artists provide the symbols and metaphors which describe the spiritual relationship.

So it was for *la raza*, the Mexican-American community of this country in the 1960s. This cultural group underwent an important change in their awareness of self and that change brought about the need for self-definition. The naming ceremony not only helped to bond the group, it created a new vision of the group's potential.

Where did the Chicanos turn for the content needed in the naming ceremony? Quite naturally the community turned to its history and found many of its heroes in the recent epoch of the Mexican Revolution. Some of us explored the deeper stratum of Mexican history, "myth" and "legend." It was in the mythology of the Aztecs that the Chicano cultural nationalists found the myth of Aztlán. How did the content of that myth become part of the new consciousness of our community? That is the question which our philosophers have tackled from various perspectives, and it has been part of my preoccupation.

The naming ceremony, or redefinition of the group, occurred within the ranks of the Indohispanos of the Southwest in the 1960s. Leaders within the Hispanic community—educators, poets, writers, artists, activists—rose up against the majority presence of Anglo-America to defend the right of the

Aztlán: A Homeland Without Boundaries

Rudolfo A. Anaya

The ceremony of naming, or of self-definition, is one of the most important acts a community performs. To particularize the group with a name is a fundamental step of awareness in the evolution of tribes as well as nations. The naming coalesces the history and values of the group, provides an identification necessary for its relationship to other groups or nations, and most important, the naming ceremony restores pride and infuses renewed energy which manifests itself in creative ways.

I have reflected often during the last fifteen years on the naming ceremony that took place in the southwestern United States when the Chicano community named Aztlán as its homeland in the late 1960s. This communal event and the new consciousness and consequent creative activity which was generated within the Chicano community during this period marked an important historical time for our people.

The naming ceremony creates a real sense of nation, for it fuses the spiritual and political aspirations of a group and provides a vision of the group's role in history. These aspirations are voiced by the artists who create the language and symbols which are used in the naming ceremony. The politicians of the group may describe political relationships and symbols, but it is the artist who gives deeper and long-lasting expression to a

Hispanic community to exist as a national entity within the United States. Two crucial decisions were made during this period by these guardians of the culture: one was the naming of the Chicano community and the second was the declaration of Aztlan as the ancestral homeland. "Somos Chicanos," we are Chicanos, declared the leaders of the nationalistic movement, and thus christened the Mexican-American community with a name which had archaic roots. By using this term the Chicano community consciously and publicly acknowledged its Native American heritage, and thus opened new avenues of exploration by which we could more clearly define the mestizo who is the synthesis of European and Indian ancestry.

"Aztlan is our homeland" was the second declaration, and this assertion defined the "national" status for the group. Aztlan was the place of origin of the Aztecs of Mesoamerica, the place of the seven caves recorded in their legends. The Chicanos had returned to Native American legend to find the psychological and spiritual birthplace of their ancestors.

These declarations were of momentous, historical significance. An identity and a homeland were designated once again on the northern borders of Hispanic America. The naming of Aztlan was a spontaneous act which took place throughout the Southwest, and the feat was given authenticity in a meeting that was held in Denver in 1969 to draft *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan*. The naming of the homeland created a Chicano spiritual awareness which reverberated throughout the Southwest, and the naming ceremony was reenacted wherever Chicanos met to discuss their common destiny. I believe that no other activity of the Chicano Movement was as important as this declaration. It is now time to explore why such an event took place, and to examine closely the possibilities which were inherent in that event.

The threat to the Chicano community was most often defined by the leaders of the Chicano Movement of the 1960s as a political and economic threat, an exploitation of the Mexican-American population. Finding solutions to economic and political exploitation was of paramount importance, but within the movement were also heard the voices of cultural nationalists who insisted that the definition of the homeland, Aztlan, and the reconstitution of the old tribal history and heritage were just as vital for the Chicano community. In fact, the two issues went hand in hand, and in retrospect we can see that the leaders of the two factions of the movement should have worked closer together. The cultural nationalists created the symbol of

national unity for the community; the political activists should have seen its potential and used the symbol to provide access into the mainstream political structure. The two areas of endeavor should have combined efforts, but often that was not the case.

The context of the Chicano Movement was broad, and the struggles for definition of goals and leadership within the movement still need more historical analysis. I leave that review of the broader picture of the movement to other disciplines; my focus is the naming of Aztlan. What indeed took place when the Chicanos defined their homeland? How did the momentous act serve the Chicanos then and today? Why had we returned to Aztec legend to name the homeland, and how did that return to legend create "rights (to homeland) by legend?" "Would this "right by legend" be as powerful a binding force for Chicanos as "right by treaty?" We knew we could turn to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, a historical treaty between nations, to define ourselves as Mexicans with certain rights within the borders of the United States, but that political definition had never been enough. A group defines itself not only politically but it also defines its character, that is, its soul. To define ourselves we turned to Native American legend, and there we found a meaningful part of our ethos.

My thoughts lead me to believe that the tribes of our species arrive at new stages of communal awareness as they evolve. During these historical moments of illumination, the group creates the context of its destiny in time, and so the group becomes master of its own time, or as Miguel Leon-Portilla, the renowned Mexican philosopher, would say, the group becomes the "señores of their own time." Did we indeed become the "señores of our own time" during the 1960s? Did we take charge of the time and create the epic literature which would define us?

Let us review the historical setting for the Indohispanos of the Southwest when we celebrated the naming ceremony. It was a time when we saw our community assaulted by poverty and oppression; the denigrating effects of racism ate away at our pride and stamina. Assimilation, on the other hand, only raised false hopes for our people, so it was a time of crisis, a time that begged for the "señores of the communal time" to once again insist on our right to our values and history. If this didn't happen our community was doomed to existence as a tourist commodity, admired for its quaint folkways but not taken seriously by the world of nations.

For too long the Indohispano community had projected only its Spanish history and heritage, for that projection suited the powers that dealt with this community as a tourist commodity and as a community that could do service work for the society in power. That identity left out the reality of our mestizo heritage. Part of the Movement's work was to revive our connection with our Indian past, and to seek a truer definition of that past. This meant reviving the history, myths, spiritual thought, legends, and symbols from Native America which were part of the Chicano's collective history. The search found the umbilical cord which led to Indian Mesoamerica and the Pueblos of the Rio Grande; that is, in the act of declaring our identity and nationality, we acknowledged our Indian American parentage.

It was in Mesoamerica that we rediscovered the legend of Aztlan, a story of mythic proportions, rooted as it was in the tribal memory of the Aztecs. Why was the legend not readily available to us, say in the legends of the Pueblos of the Rio Grande? Perhaps it was, but by the middle of the twentieth century we as "Hispanos" were separated from the Pueblo Indian world of our ancestors. A color consciousness which has been such a negative element in the history of the Americas affected our own people, and, falling prey to the pressure, the large mestizo population moved to identify with that which was Hispanic. Indian thought, once accessible to our ancestors, was withdrawn to the inner circle of the Pueblo, and the myths of the Americas were revealed only to those of us who delved into the symbolic meanings in the collective memory.

In 1848 there was the continued sense of separation when the United States annexed what is now the Southwest from Mexico. Separation from roots created vulnerability because our worldview was centered in community and its relationship to the earth. Even in the endeavor of education where democracy promised equality and access, we felt denied. Thus our search for Chicano roots led to Mesoamerica and Aztec legend, and there we found Aztlan; put another way, Aztlan was waiting for us.

In Aztlan, the legend said, the seven tribes emerged from the seven caves of a mountain, a descriptive and archetypal metaphor which expresses the coming into a new age of consciousness from a prior time. They left Aztlan because they had received the prophecy to migrate south in search of Tenochtitlan, there to establish their new civilization. How may we interpret this? Was this archetypal expulsion from the place of origin (Aztlan) like an

expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the motif of an archetype in myth repeating itself? Or was leaving the place of origin a challenge to humanity, a challenge of evolution?

The ancestors of the Aztecs named their homeland Aztlan, and legend placed it north of Mexico. Aztlan was the place of origin, the sipapu, the Eden of those tribes. There they came to a new relationship with their god of war, Huitzilopochtli, and he promised to lead them in their migration out of Aztlan. This was spiritual yearning and evolution working hand in hand. They figuratively and literally emerged into the present world, their present time, and they became the "señores of their own time." More literal interpretations have suggested the seven tribes were seven clans who broke the covenant of Aztlan and were expelled; I choose to interpret the legend in the context of world mythology. Leaving the caves of Aztlan was paramount to being born, and with birth came suffering and the migration out of Aztlan to the land promised by their war god. Spiritual aspiration had moved them to form a new covenant with Huitzilopochtli which would sustain them during the long years of migration southward, eventually to found the civilization of Tenochtitlan, present day Mexico City.

The migration and quest of the original inhabitants of Aztlan can be viewed in the context of world mythology: like the Jews migrating from Egypt in the time of their Exodus to settle in the promised land, the Aztecs migrated south to establish the new nation of Tenochtitlan. These elements of the saga are the stuff of great drama and tragedy. In 1521 Cortes and his Spaniards were to lay siege to the Aztec kingdom and destroy it. But good drama and tragedy rise from the archetypal content of myth, and the time of myth is continuous. For me, the most interesting element in that history is the often-hidden fact that it was those Mesoamerican Indians who later journeyed up the Rio Grande with the Spanish conquistadores; they were returning to their original homeland.

Chicano writers interested in the old legends which revealed our Native American past were drawn to the legend of Aztlan and its meaning. In it we saw a definition of our homeland from a Native American point of view, and we explored that area of history. What and where was the mythic Aztlan? Could the old legends of indigenous America serve a useful purpose in the Chicano Movement? Why did this legend of the indigenous homeland have such an influence on our thinking? We knew that the absorption of the

Chicano into the mainstream American culture was occurring so quickly that unless we re-established the covenants of our ancestors our culture was threatened with extinction. In fact, some suggested that the Chicano community should assimilate into the Anglo-American mainstream and forget its history and language. The concept of a bilingual, bi-cultural group within the United States was seen as a threat, and in many quarters that view is still held today. The time of crisis for our community demanded a new definition of national unity.

For me, part of the answer lies in an interpretation of human nature and its relationship to myth. Myth is our umbilical connection to the past, to the shared collective memory. After long years spent in the realm of imagination and creativity, I came to understand that many of the symbols which welled up from my subconscious were not learned, they were part of my ethos, symbols from the archetypal memory residing in the blood. Another question intrigued me: our communal relationship with time. The ancestors of the Aztecs had lived through a period of heightened awareness. Were we the Chicanos living through a similar period of time in the 1960s?

I believe the essence of the Chicano Movement was the naming ceremony I have described, and the creation of a cultural nationalist consciousness which brought together our community. This coming together in the naming ceremony duplicated the earlier time in the history of our ancestors. Yes, there was a real Aztlán, but there was also the spiritual Aztlán, the place of the covenant with the gods, the psychological center of our Indian history. During the period of awareness, the collective soul of the group renewed itself through myth; it is what the tribes of humankind have done throughout history.

The communal activity was crucial to the scenario, for myth is a communal response to spiritual crisis. The new consciousness created in the 1960s was a psychological centering, and the possibility of being in touch with our real history was available to each individual. We had become the "señores and the señoras of our own time" in the ceremony of naming, and it is important to stress the role of the Chicana, for the women of our community played a pivotal role in creating the Movement. One only has to look at the literature of the period to read the celebration of Aztlán which we created.

We took a new look at the history of the Indiohispano community in the

Southwest, a group whose traditions dated back to the sixteenth century and the entry of the Hispanos and Mexicanos into the pueblos of the Rio Grande. A unique Indiohispano culture had evolved along the northern Rio Grande, a product of the process of synthesis which was already at work in Mexico as the Old World and the New World met and merged. The most interesting development of that process was the evolution of the "New World person," the person in touch with the mythology of the Americas which I have explored in my writing.

The same synthesis would not take place when the Anglo-American came to the Southwest in the mid-nineteenth century. The Hispano and Anglo worlds remained apart, meeting to conduct business in an ethnic mosaic, but seldom creating a personal commingling. The genetic pools have not mixed in a significant way, and only in a small way is it occurring in contemporary times. Still, the issue of ethnicity is not static and it is one we need to face creatively.

The established Indiohispano culture was based in the villages, but by the 1960s the community was largely an urban group, and so to reconstitute our history during this time of crisis some returned to the villages to look for origins. Another meaningful return was into the history of the Americas where we examined our Indian roots, the soul of the Americas. There we found not only indigenous historical time, but mythical time which is continuous; that discovery was to have a tremendous impact on the healing of our social fabric. In Mesoamerica we encountered the pre-Columbian thought of Mexico. That return to the legends and myths of the New World led the Chicano to Aztlán. In the process of returning to our myths and legends we were not short-sighted idealists that thought the oppression our community suffered would disappear. We knew better, but our search was spiritual in nature, and our community desperately needed the reaffirmation. We had faith that by bringing to light our history, even the esoteric history of myth and legend, we could bring to fruition a cultural renaissance and create a new time of hermandad. That new era of brotherhood would not only unify us, it would unleash the creative potential of the Chicano community.

In the 1960s the same spiritual yearnings and crisis that had concerned the original inhabitants of Aztlán now concerned the Chicanos. A cycle of Chicano history was repeating itself. Our poets and writers became the

leaders of the Chicano Movement, and as they brought to focus the aspirations of the people they took upon themselves a role common to our culture, the role of older, wiser leaders or ancianos, the role of those señoras and señoras who dare to be aware of the burden of time and act to alleviate the burden for the communal good of the people. Needless to say, those same leaders would be criticized when the ambitious goals of the Movement were not fully realized.

A new question arose: Would the promise of continuity and self-actualization inherent in our myths and legends bring with it the fruition of potential and freedom? Could we save our history and community from obliteration within the confines of Anglo-America by incorporating the old legends into our worldview? Some said no. Myth was ephemeral, it had no substance, it distorted reality. What the Chicanos needed was direct political mobilization, perhaps revolution. They did not need to arm themselves with ancient stories.

Those of us who saw the potential of myth as truth, or myth as self-knowledge, argued that it was indigenous America that held the tap root of our history; its mythology was the mirror by which to know ourselves. Chicanos had to experience a new awareness of self, just as our Native American ancestors had come to that new plane of consciousness eight centuries before in Aztlán, and coming to this knowledge of our historical continuity was a means toward community action.

Aztlán is real because myth is real, we argued. Aztlán was potential because it was a place of prophecy. Migrating groups of Asians, in the process of becoming indigenous Americans, had settled in Aztlán. There they evolved new levels of spiritual orientation to cosmos, earth, and community. Isn't this the process of spiritual and psychological evolution? Isn't this how our human potential evolves? So it happened to these tribes of Native Americans. Somewhere in the deserts and mountains of what we now call the Southwest, they created a covenant with their gods and from there they moved south to Mexico to complete the prophecy.

Of course they did not arrive at full potential, no one ever does. They were still heir to human failure, but we know their later artistic achievements were of a grand scale. Even their warring society would incorporate the religion of peace of Quetzalcoatl. All of Mesoameric and the tributaries as far north as Chaco and Mesa Verde were, I suspect, renewed during that era.

A new age of spiritual illumination had come to the Americas, and the journey from Aztlán to Mexico was part of that tremendous change. From the Pueblos of the Río Grande to Mesoamerica and neighboring tribes, the people of the Americas were evolving into new realms of consciousness.

The need for a homeland is inherent in the collective memory of any group, it is a covenant with the tribal gods. The spiritual yearning for homeland is encompassing, but because the geography of the earth is limited, homelands rub against each other and create friction. We have not yet moved to a new consciousness where the Earth truly becomes the homeland of everyone. Perhaps that is our next step in evolution, and perhaps there are already signs that this is happening. Do we as heirs and inhabitants of Aztlán dare to take this next step and consider our homeland without boundaries? Do we dare to reach out and encompass the true spiritual relationship inherent in homeland with every other group who dreams of homeland?

The Indohispano of the Southwest was influenced by the spirituality of the pueblos of the Río Grande, even though the Catholic faith was imposed on the indigenous faith. There were elements of brutality in the Spanish conquest, this is documented, but the synthesis which was taking place in Mexico between the Old World and the New World was accelerated in Aztlán after the 1680 Pueblo Revolt. The Indohispano religious sensibility was influenced by the Pueblos, and so respect for the earth became an important ingredient in the unique worldview being formed in Aztlán. The recognition of the Earth as mother (*la sagrada tierra*) permeated the spiritual life of the Hispanic villages, and the process of synthesis fused Spanish Catholicism with Native American thought. The clearest symbol of this process of syncretism was the merging of the Virgin Mary with the Indian Goddess (*Tonantzin*) to give form to the brown madonna of Mexico, *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. Truly, an original blend of American spirituality was evolving.

What did all this mean to the real world of politics which the Chicano struggled to enter and influence in the 1960s? Unfortunately, the historical assessment made thus far weighs heavily on a materialistic interpretation. I am convinced that a history of that era and of our culture must take both the sacred and the profane into account. To understand our culture only through a materialistic account will not provide a true picture of the nature of our community. For me, the Chicano Movement succeeded because it changed part of our social and political role within the society, but also because it

created a cultural renaissance in the Chicano community. The release of creative energy in which the artists defined self and community was the hallmark of the Movement. The spiritual energy which once filled the consciousness of the original inhabitants of Aztlán and propelled them south to Mexico to fulfill their destiny led us to proclaim our existence and found our nation.

A spirit of liberation swept over our people, releasing a chain reaction of new energy, initiative and originality. The Movement gave birth to the term Chicano, the bold new image born of Hispanic and Indian synthesis. To some extent that image penetrated the Anglo-American consciousness, and to some degree it moved into a world stage. But the image was really for our community, the naming was to renew identity and awareness of our history. The changes wrought in the psyche of the Hispanics of the Southwest by the use of the word Chicano were enormous. True, some in our community resisted the naming and to this day do not identify with Chicano, but one cannot deny the positive benefits of reinvigorated pride, especially in artistic creativity, which swept across the land.

The true guardians of Aztlán have been the Rio Grande Pueblo people, and the knowledge and love for their homeland has kept their spiritual thought alive in the face of overwhelming odds. They have kept themselves centered with the earth, and that has provided their communities a spiritual and psychological center. The Chicano, the new *raza* of the Americas, is heir to the same earth and a legacy of spiritual thought which can help center the individual. In a world so in need of ecological and spiritual awareness which would allow us to save the earth and practice democratic principles of love and sharing, these ties to the earth and the care we must give to this area we call Aztlán still provide hope for our community. We have within us the inner resources to become new guardians of the earth and of peace.

We have seen the blossoming of this potential in our generation. Chicano art, music and literature have gained a foothold and are shaping new perceptions. Within the arts lie reflections of our values, not only the cultural trappings of the day to day world, but the old values which spring from our mythologies. Respect for the earth of Aztlán is one of these values, and if we are truly living in an era of a new consciousness, we must reach further into our human potential and consider Aztlán a homeland without boundaries.

This is a most difficult proposal, the idea that we can move beyond our ethnocentric boundaries, that we can envision the limitations of ethnicity even as we extol our self-pride. The argument of survival in our modern world seems to urge us towards the common center of our humanity. When we established our rights to the homeland of Aztlán, we understood that that right belongs to every group or nation, and we understood how we share in all the homelands of world mythology. The children of Aztlán are citizens of the world. We must move beyond the limitations of ethnicity to create a world without borders. Each community rising to its new level of awareness creates respect for self and for others, and we are in need of this awareness before we destroy the Earth and each other.

An idealistic, utopian thought? Perhaps, but one we need to dare to consider. Those who deal in competition and the selfishness of the modern nation-state are in control, and they have falsely named competition and material gain as the true values of the world. Perhaps it's time to think of unity. Aztlán can become the nation that mediates between Anglo-America and Latin America. We can be the leaders who propose human answers to the human problems of the Americas. The real problem of border regions when addressed from a world perspective should be dealt with in human terms, in terms of families and neighbors, not terms of profit or ideology. Unity and human potential should guide us, not market values and the gross national product. This, after all, is the challenge of our generation, to create a consciousness which fosters the flowering of the human spirit, not its exploitation. We need healing in our world community; it can start here.

This is the legacy of Aztlán: it is a place where seven tribes of humankind came to a new awareness of their potential, a new sensitivity in their relationship to earth and cosmos. Here those first inhabitants of Aztlán took their destiny into their own hands, they were born into a new prophecy, and they moved to complete it. Can we do less?

That illumination and leap of faith for those people did not make for perfection. History moves us toward perfection through small epiphanies. The tribes moved out of Aztlán as Adam and Eve moved out of Eden, to challenge the future and to fulfill their potential. Our nature moves us forward, groping for illumination, yearning for a truer knowledge of our spiritual and human relationships. We know within that we can create a more fulfilling and harmonious future. For me, this is the promise of Aztlán.