

Ancient Maya Civilization

LD 1: Mesoamerican Naming Ceremony

Introduction: So that you may experience the naming ceremony so prevalent in Mesoamerican ritual, I will use the late Mesoamerican or Mexica Aztec “naming ceremony” as the basis for this exercise so that we may rely on available electronic and Internet resources. As such, please note that the Aztec calendar was adopted from a much older Mesoamerican calendrical system that originated with the Preclassic Olmec civilization (ca. 2200 BCE – 300 BCE). The solar-calendar year of 365.252 days (or 18 months of 20 days each for 360 days) was in turn utilized by the ancient Maya (ca. 200 – 900 CE) in conjunction with a sacred almanac of some 260 days (i.e., 13 months of 20 days each) that was based on the number of days constituting the agricultural cycle, an astronomical event demarcating the solstice and equinox events, and or the approximate period of human gestation.

The Aztec borrowed this Mesoamerican calendrical system and adopted it to their system of numeration that included a variety of unique symbols. The Aztec referred to the solar year as the *Xiupohualli* (or 18 months of 20 days each plus the 5 *Nemontemi* or “unlucky” days for 365 days total). The *Tonalpohualli* (or “Calendar Round”) further distinguished and further subdivided a grand cycle of 52 years and calendar with a system based on a count of 13 “weeks” of 20 days each for a total of 260 days. Only four possible year names subdivided and distinguished the 52-year calendar count. These year bearers consisted of the year of the Rabbit, Reed, Flint Knife, and House. This calendar count was then recorded in the so-called *Tonalamatl* (“day-count”) or “Sacred Almanac” which was in turn used to divine the fate of each and every person born under a specific year and day name. The passage of two great calendar rounds of 52 years, or 104 years, was paid special reverence as this represented the coincidence or recycling of both the solar and the sacred calendars.

Challenge 1: Calculating Your Birth Name: Using the “Aztec Calendar” calculator, you are to enter your birth date into the calendar calculator located at: <http://www.azteccalendar.com/calendar.html>. Having entered your birth date, you are to have the calculator generate your birth name. Having obtained your birth name, you are to record your birth name and that information associated with the different calendrical and religious signs associated with your birth name.

Challenge 2: Meeting Your Spiritual Counterparts: Having obtained your “year” name, or the first portion of your calendar name and “sign” (i.e., numbered Rabbit, Reed, Flint Knife, or House), you are to meet with your counterparts and work to interpret the “reading” of your fate from the *Tonalpohualli* and electronic *Tonalamatl* located at the aforementioned Internet address.

Challenge 3: Interpreting and Presenting your Fate: Once you have met with your respective group or counterparts, you are to describe yourself and your fate to the class based on what you have learned this day. Begin with your name (first and last names), and then move to a discussion about how closely you believe that the “Sacred Almanac” and calendar calculator determined and defined what you know, or believe to be, your fate or destiny.

Finally, having reviewed your fate with the class, please comment on how it is that you believe that each of those animals or things associated with each day name, month, or interpretation of your fate may have come to have that association. Consider any and all of those characteristics that may be relevant in your interpretation.