

Reader's Theatre Note for teachers:

Thank you for your interest in sharing the indigenous elements of Mexican Day of the Dead traditions with your students! Here we provide an introduction and Reader's Theatre version of an Aztec legend explaining the origin of the cempasúchil (marigold) flower, the Flower of the Dead. You may include the other activities depending on the grade and the amount of time you have available. You might consider sharing one of these videos as a preview before reading the play together. You can also use the videos to teach the pronunciation of the 5 key Náhuatl words (Cempasúchil, Anáhuac, Xóchitl, Huitzilin, and Tonatiuh).

Spanish: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tFENERch6c>

English: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6p1-H6E5-M>

For younger students: Teachers may choose to read the play themselves and have younger children participate by creating stick-figure puppets for the three (or more) characters and holding them up when they are mentioned and during their dialogue (see other attachment).

Before reading:

Actividad 1: In groups of 2, talk about legends that you already know. ¿Have you ever heard or read magical explanations about how natural elements were formed, such as rainbows, thunder, lakes, or the moon?

Actividad 2: In groups of 2, go online to investigate what the geography of Anáhuac (Basin of Mexico) was like before the Spanish arrived and how it changed afterwards. You should include the words “plateau,” “valley,” and “lakes.” You can use these links or others to describe the land. Discuss why these geographical features would have been important to the Aztec people.

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Anahuac>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valley_of_Mexico

https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valle_de_M%C3%A9xico

Introduction:

Do your families or communities tell myths or legends? Some legends try to explain how elements from nature were created through magic. For example, the legend of Paul Bunyon describes how he created lakes and the Grand Canyon with his enormous axe.

Mexican culture has a rich history of legends. Some are indigenous, or part of the original culture of the Americas before the Europeans arrived. We are going to read a Nahuatl legend, the indigenous culture of the Aztecs, who ruled in Mexico just before the Spanish conquered their land.

This legend explains the origin of a special flower named cempasúchil in Nahuatl, the Aztec language. In English it is called a “marigold”. This flower is important to celebrate the Day of the Dead, which is a tradition that mixes indigenous elements within the Christian religion that was brought to Mexico by the Spanish. According to the legend, Tonatiuh, the Sun god, created the flower to help to young people that were separated by death. Let’s see what happened.

While you read: Think about what the message of this legend might be. What can it teach us?

The Legend of the Cempasúchil Flower

Readers Theater

Narrator 1: In the beginning, the Aztec gods controlled the Anáhuac Valley. The rain made the valleys turn green again. Today, we call this land México.

Narrator 2: Every afternoon, two young people Xóchitl and Huitzilin, climbed the great mountain dedicated to Tonatiuh, the Aztec Sun god.

Narrator 3: They always placed a bouquet of flowers there in his honor.

Narrator 4: Xóchitl and Huitzilin had grown up together and, with time, love grew between them.

Xóchitl: (*leaving flowers on the mountain to thank Tonatiuh*): Today, like every day, we come to thank you for our great love.

Huitzilin: (*praying with his hands together*): ¡Thank you, Lord Sun for keeping us together!

Tonatiuh: (*thinking to himself*) Hmmmm... ¡These kids sure love each other, and how well they behave, honoring me with an offering of flowers!

Narrator 5: The grateful god sent down his warm embrace to the couple and blessed their love (*extends hands*).

Narrator 6: Among the sunrays, Xóchitl and Huitzilin swore to love each other forever.

Narrador/a 7: But one day, a war began and Huitzilin had to leave to fight and defend his Aztec people.

Huitzilin: (*waving goodbye*) I must go, but I promise to return.

Narrador/a 8: Soon, news arrived that he had died and Xóchitl felt she would die too.

Narrador/a 9: So, she climbed the mountain and begged Tonatiuh to reunite her with her love.

Xóchitl (*crying*): ¡My god! You are a witness to my great love and my heart which has been left empty (*lifting her arms to the sky*). I ask that you reunite me with my love!

Narrador/a 10: The Sun, pleased by their offerings, listened to her.

Tonatiuh: (*raising his hand to his heart*): Her pain moves me; I have to help her (*reaches his hands toward Xóchitl several times*).

Narrador/a 11: The Sun threw his rays and turned Xóchitl into a flower. This is how cempasúchil was created, the flower of the dead.

Narrador/a 12: A hummingbird perched lovingly in the center of the flower. The little bird was Huitzilin, also transformed by Tonatiuh.

Narrador/a 13: As soon as the hummingbird touched the flower, it opened its twenty petals. (*Xóchitl reaches out her arms. Xóchitl y Huitzilín hug*).

Narrador/a 14: Tonatiuh's spell united Xóchitl and Huitzilín for the rest of their lives.

Narrador/a 15: As long as cempasúchil flowers and hummingbirds exist, they will remain together.

Narrador/a 14: On the Day of the Dead, it is believed that the smell of the cempasúchil flower guides the souls of the dead on their path back to the offerings that wait for them on altars in the land of the living.

Narrador/a 15: By including cempasúchil in our offerings, we hope that the spirits come back to visit us, and in this way, we meet again with our loved ones, just like Xóchitl y Huitzilín did.

After Reading:

Activity 1: The Central Message

What is the message of the legend? In groups of 2, consider the following options and decide which best expresses the main idea. Look for evidence in the reading and underline the words that help you defend your choice. Be prepared to explain why your evidence supports your choice.

- A. Love always overcomes all obstacles.
- B. It is important to give thanks for the positive things that we have.
- C. War must be avoided because it has negative consequences for everyone.
- D. It is necessary to wait for help instead of acting.

Discuss: Now that we have considered the importance of giving thanks, consider the following questions in groups of 2:

1. Do we give thanks only because it may benefit us in the future?
2. If not, what are some other reasons we give thanks?
3. How does it make us feel to give thanks and how can it make others feel when we thank them?

Activity 2: Make a Collage

Think of someone who has died for whom you would like to make an offering and remember their life on Day of the Dead. It can be a family member, friend, or someone famous. Instead of creating an altar, look for pictures or photos of things that they most enjoyed in life (food, drinks, activities, etc.). Cut them out and paste them on a sheet of paper to represent the offering you would like to make for him or her. Leave a blank border around your collage to decorate it later.

Finally, decorate the border with indigenous elements of the tradition to represent the four natural elements.

Earth: cempasúchil, orange marigold flowers

Wind: papel picado, brightly colored cut-out paper banners that wave in the breeze

Fire: candles, also used to guide the spirits back home

Water: You can draw a cup of water for the spirits who might be thirsty after their journey

Puppet Templates

Xóchitl



Huitzilin



Tonatiuh



Cempasúchil



Hummingbird

