

Name _____ Date _____

Mesoamerica

"Hay Nativos"

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. Today, it may be hard to find the heritage of the millions of original Americans who populated North and South America. Mostly, this is because huge numbers of those Native Americans were conquered and killed, either by new diseases or European guns. Cultural ignorance and a self-centered worldview allowed the white settlers to dismiss the Native Americans as "savages."

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We now know a lot more about three major empires: the Maya, Aztec and Inca civilizations. These people built large cities to live in and giant temples to worship their gods. They didn't live in paradise; owning slaves was common in Mesoamerica. But they also demonstrated lots of practical knowledge, from astronomy to farming techniques to medicines. These were the original Americans.

2. The first culture to build cities in the Americas was probably the Olmec. They lived along the Gulf of Mexico beginning around 1200 BCE and built pyramids in the jungle. Though they were forgotten until 1862 when a man stumbled upon some of their remnants, the Olmec culture is sometimes called the Mother Culture of Mesoamerica because they strongly influenced the societies that would follow. It is possible that the Olmec were the first civilization in the Western Hemisphere to develop a system of writing.

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Some of the Olmec were sculptors and artisans. They were a ritualistic people, governed by both kings and priests. They also traded with other peoples and may even have come up with a calendar. Olmec items have been found in various parts of Central America, but the Olmec are most famous for the large stone heads they carved.

3. The next great civilization in the Americas was probably the Maya. In fact, archaeologists considered them the first for a long time. They were a farming people who lived on the Yucatan Peninsula between 300 and 900 CE. The Maya bore a lot of similarities to the Olmec.

Most Mayan men lived in villages and were advanced agriculturalists. We know this because they practiced intercropping, where certain crops are planted together, using one to stimulate the growth of the other.

The Maya also built huge cities. Some archaeologists estimate that one such municipality, Tikal, now found in Guatemala, was home to as many as 100,000 residents at one time. There were more than 3,000 buildings there, some towering high over the jungle.

The Mayans were very advanced in mathematics, astronomy and engineering. In Tikal this manifested in their construction of reservoirs to hold water for the city. The water moved between man-made lakes using gravity in such a manner that they must have had a deep knowledge of mathematics.

4. Like the Olmec, the Maya were an advanced civilization. They constructed great structures, including pyramids, temples, palaces and small stadiums in their city-states across Central America. The Maya were also advanced when it came to sciences and writing. They created a writing system and an accurate calendar. The Temple of Kukulcan has 365 steps to represent each day of the year. The Maya calendar, similar to the one used today, reflects their skill in astronomy.

For all of their artistic and scientific sophistication, though, they were a harsh people. They had slaves, and human sacrifice was common. They played a rubber ball game that usually ended in the losers being ritually killed. And they were fierce warriors. While their ancient culture largely disappeared in 869 CE, the Maya still live in their ancestral homelands in southern Mexico and northern Central America.

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5. The Aztecs were a very sophisticated people. They had a calendar and a writing system just like the Maya. Sometime between 1200 and 1325, the Aztec people transformed from nomadic hunters to farmers.

They built a large city, where modern-day Mexico City is located, called Tenochtitlan right on an island in the middle of the lake. They built bridges, or causeways, that connected the island to the mainland. Historians estimate the population in Tenochtitlan to have been about 200,000 at its height. It's where Montezuma, the famous leader of the Aztecs when the Spanish invaded, had his palace. The city was destroyed in 1521 by the Spanish conquistador Hernandez Cortes.

Like the Maya, the Aztecs sacrificed humans in order, they believed, to honor and serve the gods. They didn't want to sacrifice the people who lived in their own cities and villages, so they relied on taking slaves and captives from other villages and tribes.

6. While the Aztecs ruled what is now Mexico, the Inca were busy in the Andes mountains, where they built the biggest kingdom in all the Americas. Based in Cuzco, Peru, the Incan empire, at its height in the 12th century, spanned modern Ecuador to northern Chile. More than a million people lived in its bounds. And there were supposedly close to 20,000 miles of roads connecting the various tribes who lived under the rule of the Incan king.

Incan engineers were as sophisticated as any at the time, building acres of farmland on terraces in the Andes. They constructed forts that still stand today, even though they used no mortar between the blocks. They put up aqueducts and had some of the best medical techniques of the ancient world.

7. Machu Picchu is an extraordinary place for many reasons. It's an ancient city on a 9,000-foot mountain top with stunning views, but beyond its obvious beauty, it's fascinating because it cannot be seen from below.

Historians now think this city from the early 1400s was a secret place. It was home to more than 150 houses and palaces, temples and baths—all up in the clouds. The buildings were carved out of the granite from the mountain. No one knows for sure what the Inca did there, but it was almost certainly used as an astronomic observatory. The Spanish never found Machu Picchu.

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