

A Ceremonial Tradition: Dance of the Aztec people

Written by By Dee Velasco Sun Correspondent
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This year's Inter-tribal Indian Ceremonial proved once again that a rich culture still thrives, keeping the crowd as excited as ever.

One particular crowd-pleasing Native American performing group is Danza Mexi'cayotl, which translates as "The Dance of the Aztec/Mexican People."

Group leader Mario Aguilar has been performing in the Ceremonial with his family for quite some time.

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“I started when I was 19, and that was almost 42 years ago,” Aguilar, who began dancing while attending San Diego State University, said.

At that time, “Mexican people in the United States were calling ourselves Chicanos,” Aguilar said. But they were also beginning to discover and explore their Indigenous roots.

“We realized our foods, our blood were Native Americans — our faces, our traditions were Native American heritage, and all this time, we were always told we were Spanish. We never knew that we were Native American, so this was a great time for us to discover all of our traditions, history, our indigenous roots in Mexico.”

Aguilar and his group, which consists of 50 people, hail from the San Diego area of California. Twenty-two members of the Azteca dancers attended this year’s Ceremonial.

The group and the Mexi’cayotl Indio Cultural Center in San Diego consist of community members who, along with dancing, also work toward social justice and diversity.

Aguilar’s tribe comes from Mexico.

“My tribe is Nahua Otomi, meaning ‘Aztec,’” he said. “These are the people who have been up in the mountains of Mexico 8,000 years ago, which is the oldest tribe in Mexico.”

The tribe’s roots extend before the Aztecs, Mayans, or Toltecs, Aguilar said.

“These are the ones that kept our traditions alive; when the Spanish came, they were forced to become Catholics,” he noted.

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A result of the Catholic take-over was the integration of Catholic tradition into that of Aguilar's tribe.

"So instead of dancing for the Mother Earth," he explained, "we're going to dance for the Mother of Christ; instead of dancing for the Sun, we're going to dance for Son of God; instead of dancing for the Magay spirit, we're going to dance for this saint."

While the façade may have changed, the traditions, whether Catholic or Native American in name, remain the same.

"They just converted everything," Aguilar said, "but we still dance the same traditions, but now with Christian and Native American traditions and meanings."

By Dee Velasco

Sun Correspondent