

INDIGENOUS MÉXICO: **An Introduction to México's** **Remarkable Diversity**

By John P. Schmal

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6,912 Languages in the World

According to SIL International, there are 6,912 known living languages in the world. Of this, 291 living languages are recognized by SIL International to be in México.

El Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas (INALI) recognizes 364 language variants in México. This does not include a large number of languages that once existed throughout Central and Northern México and which are now culturally extinct.

The Evolution of Mexico's Languages

When Hernán Cortés arrived in México in 1519, some experts claim that there were 180 languages spoken throughout the region. Since then, some of the languages have become culturally extinct, while some dialects have diverged from one another to become new languages.

The Living Languages in México

The indigenous languages of México belong to three major groups (linguistic stocks) as well as six “linguistic families” which are not related to other languages. The three stocks are the **Uto-Aztecan, Hokan and Otomanguean stocks**. The language families are **Mayan, Algonquian, Huave, Mixe-Zoquean, Purépecha and Totonaca**.

Some of these groups include languages of Guatemala (the Mayan family) and others include languages of the United States and Canada (the Algonquian family, Hokan stock and Uto-Aztecan stock).

Where are Mexico's Indigenous Peoples Living Today?

- Most Mexican Indians live in the south (Guerrero, Oaxaca and Chiapas) or the east (Veracruz, Puebla and the Yucatán Peninsula). See the map on the following page.
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Present Day Indigenous Mexico



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DEFINITION OF “FAMILY”

FAMILY: A family is a group of languages that easily can be shown to be genetically related when the basic evidence is examined. For example, the Romance family includes the Romanian, Italian, Spanish, French, Catalan and Portuguese languages (including their regional variants: Florentine, Milanese, Sicilian). These are all considered genetically related because they developed historically from Latin.

Similarly, the Germanic family includes English, Dutch and German. In some cases, a language may be a family by itself because there are now no languages related to it at this level.

THE FAMILIES OF MEXICO

There are TWENTY FAMILIES of indigenous languages in México. These twenty families are represented by 62 official ethno-linguistic groups (grupos etno-linguísticos).

Sources: Ethnologue.com, National Indigenous Institute (INI) and Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas (INALI).

DEFINITION OF “STOCK”

A stock is a group of language families that are genetically related to each other but, because of the time depth involved, the evidence is more difficult to assemble or the relationship is less obvious.

For example, the Romance, Germanic, Amermermenian, Celtic, Slavic and Iranian families and others form the Indo-European stock (which contains 449 families in all). There are three stocks of indigenous languages in Mexico as well as six families that are not related to other families in Mexico.

DEFINITION OF “DIALECT”

A dialect is a regional variant of a language distinguished by minimal lexical, grammatical or phonological (pronunciation) differences from variants of the same language.

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<http://www.ethnologue.com>

UTO-AZTECAN STOCK (62 languages)

Northern Uto-Aztecan (13 Languages) – primarily U.S.-based (Hopi, Comanche, Paiute)

Southern Uto-Aztecan (49 Languages) of México:

1. **Sonoran (19 Languages)** of northeastern México (Mayo, Opata, Yaqui, Cora, Huichol, Tarahumara, Tepehuán of Sonora, Sinaloa, Nayarit, Chihuahua and Durango)
2. **Aztecan/Náhuatl (29 Languages)** – These languages are spread through many states of México, in particular the central and eastern sections.

THE MOST FAMOUS EMPIRE OF ALL: THE AZTEC EMPIRE

The Aztec Empire of 1519 was the most powerful Mesoamerican kingdom of all time. This multi-ethnic, multi-lingual realm stretched for more than 80,000 square miles through many parts of what is now central and southern Mexico.

This enormous empire reached from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf coast and from central Mexico to the present-day Republic of Guatemala.

Fifteen million people, living in thirty-eight provinces and residing in 489 communities, paid tribute to the Emperor Moctezuma II in Tenochtitlán, the capital city of the great empire.

Even after the Aztec Empire was destroyed in 1522, their Náhuatl Language would become the “lingua franca” of Colonial México.

WHO ARE THE AZTECS?

WHAT DOES AZTEC REALLY MEAN?

The term Aztec, properly speaking, refers to all the Nahuatl-speaking peoples in the Valley of Mexico. The Aztecs were divided into numerous local ethnic groups that were linked together into the broader Aztec culture by a common language (**Náhuatl**), a common historical origin, and many shared cultural traits.

WHO LIVED IN TENOCHTITLÁN?

The most important Aztec Indians were the **Mexica** (pronounced "me-shee-ka") tribe (also called the **Tenocha**). By the Sixteenth Century, the Mexica - through superior military power and a series of strategic alliances - had become the dominant ethnic group ruling over the Aztec Empire from their capital city at Tenochtitlán in the Valley of Mexico.

WHERE DID THE AZTECS COME FROM?

The Aztecs are just one of several groups belonging to the Uto-Aztecan Stock.

The Uto-Aztecan Group includes a wide range of languages, stretching from Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming all the way down to El Salvador in Central America, where the Pipil lived. And the Aztecs represent only a small - but significant - part of this linguistic group.

According to legend, the Aztec and other Náhuatl people came from Aztlán, their ancestral home in the northwest. "Azteca" is the Náhuatl word for "people from Aztlan."

According to Náhuatl legend, seven tribes lived in Chicomoztoc, or "The Place of the Seven Caves." Around 830 AD, a southward migration began.

WHERE DID THE AZTECS COME FROM?

During the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries, Náhuatl-speaking people from the Northwest entered the Valley of México and surrounding regions. Eventually, a patchwork of city-states evolved. Each nation state was represented by its own ruling dynasty.

Competition between the various groups led to wars and the development of several military states in which some cities imposed tribute upon their neighbors.

By 1428, the Valley of México became dominated by the Triple Alliance of Tenochtitlán, Texcoco and Tlacopan. Eventually Tenochtitlán became the dominant power.

The Aztec Empire refers to the conquests of the Triple Alliance, dominated by Tenochtitlán.

WHERE DID THE AZTECS COME FROM?

The name Aztlán was used by a group of Chicano-separatists led by Oscar Zeta Acosta during the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s. They used the name "Aztlán" to refer to the southwestern United States which was ceded to the United States at the end of the Mexican-American War (1846-1848).

The Chicanos claimed that the Southwest was the ancestral homeland of the Aztecs. From a linguistic standpoint, this is probably true. Perhaps 5,000 years ago, the ancestors of the Aztecs, Yaquis, Mayos and Tarahumaras lived in this area. The ancestors of their distant cousins – the Shoshone, Gabrielino and Paiute – stayed.

The Uto-Aztecan Family



North American Uto-Aztecan Language Group

B. Uto-Aztecan Family

1. Mono
2. Northern Paiute, Walapi, Yahuskin, Bannock
3. Shoshoni, Gosiute, Wind River, Panamint, Comanche
4. Southern Paiute, Ute, Chemehuevi, Kawaiisu
5. Hopi
6. Tubatulabal
7. Luiseno
8. Cahuilla
9. Cupeno
10. Serrano
11. Pima, Papago
12. Pima Bajo
13. Yaqui, Mayo
14. Tarahumara
15. Cora
16. Huichol
17. Tepehuan
18. Nahuatl
19. Nahuat
20. Mecayapan
21. Pipil
22. Pochutla
23. Tamaulipeco

Reference: *Atlas of the North American Indian* by Carl Waldman - Chapter 3 Indian Lifeways, page 69



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Indigenous Northwest México



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The Náhuatl Languages Include:

Most Common Náhuatl Languages	State	Less Common Náhuatl Languages	State
Sierra	Northeast Puebla	Istmo-Mecayapan	Southern Veracruz
Guerrero Aztec	Guerrero	Coatepec	State of México
Eastern Huasteca	Hidalgo, Puebla, Veracruz	Michoacán Aztec	Coastal Michoacán
Morelos	Morelos	Tetelcingo	Morelos
Central Aztec	Tlaxcala, Puebla	Tenango	Puebla
Puebla Sureste	Southeast Puebla	Tlalitzlipa	One village in Puebla
Western Huasteca	San Luis Potosí, Hidalgo	Istmo Pajapan	Veracruz
Puebla Norte	Northern Puebla	Huaxcaleca	Puebla
Orizaba Azteca	Veracruz	Ometepec	Southern Guerrero
Oaxaca Norte	Northwest Oaxaca	Temascaltepec	State of México

Linguistic Distribution of Central Mexico's Ethnic Groups



HOKAN STOCK (28 Languages)

Esselen-Yuman (10 Languages) – primarily Baja California (Kiliwa, Pai Pai, Mohave, Cocopá)

The Hokan groups of Baja California are either extinct or close to cultural extinction.

Northern Hokan (13 Languages) – United States tribes

Salinan- Seri (2 Languages) -- the Seri of Sonora

Tequistlatecan (2 Languages) – the Chontal of Oaxaca (far removed from the northern branches)

– Credit: http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=MX

OTOMANGUEAN STOCK (172 Languages)

Consists of the Amuzgoan, Mixtecan, Zapotecan, Trique, Chichimeca-Jonaz, Otomí, Popoloca, Mazateco and Chatino

This group dominates the states of Oaxaca and Guerrero but is also present in many other states, including Veracruz, Puebla, México, and Guanajuato.

Some of the Otomanguean language groups contain many languages, most notably:

Zapotecan Language Family (64 languages)

Mixtecan Language Family (57 languages)

Chinantecan Languages Family (14 languages)

WHY IS OAXACA SO DIVERSE?

Oaxaca is characterized by extreme geographic fragmentation with extensive mountain systems, wide tropical coastal plains and fertile valleys. Oaxaca's rugged topography has played a significant role in giving rise to its amazing cultural diversity.

Individual towns and tribal groups lived in isolation from each other for long periods of time. This seclusion allowed sixteen ethnolinguistic groups to maintain their individual languages, customs and ancestral traditions intact well into the colonial era.

WHY IS OAXACA SO DIVERSE?

The historian María de Los Angeles Romero Frizzi points out that "the majority of indigenous peoples in Oaxaca identify more closely with their village or their community than with their ethnolinguistic group."

For this reason, some of the language families - including Zapotec and Mixtec - "encompass a variety of regional languages." By the time the Spaniards arrived in the Valley of Oaxaca in 1521, the inhabitants had split into hundreds of independent village-states. Today, as the fifth largest state of Mexico, Oaxaca is divided into 571 municipios.

Linguistic Distribution of Oaxaca's Ethnic Groups



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FAMILIES AND LANGUAGES NOT GROUPED INTO THE STOCKS :

Algonquian – the Kickapoo/ Kikapú Indians of Coahuila

Huave – the Huave Indians of Oaxaca

Mixe-Zoquean – The Mixe and Zoque Indians of Oaxaca

**Tarascan/Purépecha – The Indigenous Peoples of
Michoacán and surrounding states.**

The Purépecha

For more than a thousand years, Michoacán has been the home of the Purépecha Indians. The name Michoacán derives from the Náhuatl terms, michin (fish) and hua (those who have) and can (place) which roughly translates into “Place of the Fisherman.”

This kingdom was one of the most prosperous and extensive empires in the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican world. Eventually, the Purépecha Kingdom would control an area of at least 45,000 square miles (72,500 square kilometers), including parts of the present-day states of Guanajuato, Guerrero, Querétaro, Colima, and Jalisco.

The Purépecha

However, 240 miles to the east, the Aztec Empire, centered in Tenochtitlán, had begun its ascendancy in the Valley of Mexico. As the Aztecs expanded their empire beyond the Valley, they came into conflict with the Tarascans.

In 1468, the Aztecs launched a powerful offensive against the Purépecha in the west. This offensive turned into a bloody and protracted conflict that lasted until 1478. Finally, in that year, a force of 32,000 Aztec warriors engaged an army of 50,000 Tarascans in the Battle of Taximaroa (today the city of Hidalgo). After a daylong battle, the Aztecs withdrew, with a loss of 20,000 warriors.

THE MAYAN FAMILY OF LANGUAGES (69 Languages)

For two thousand years, the Mayan culture prospered through most of present-day Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, western Honduras and the five Mexican states of Yucatán, Quintana Roo, Tabasco, Campeche and Chiapas. Collectively, this region has been called “El Mundo Maya” (The Mayan World). This group is divided as follows:

Cholan-Tzeltalan (12 Languages) – The Chontal, Tzeltal and Tzotzil of Chiapas and Tabasco

Huastecan (4 Languages) – the Huastecas of Veracruz and southern Tamaulipas – the northern extension of the Mayan Family

NUEVA GALICIA

The Spanish province of Nueva Galicia embraced 180,000 kilometers and included most of present-day **Jalisco, Nayarit, Aguascalientes and Zacatecas**. Across this broad range of territory, a wide array of indigenous groups lived during the Sixteenth Century.

Domingo Lázaro de Arregui, in his **Descripción de la Nueva Galicia** - published in 1621 - wrote that 72 languages were spoken in the Spanish colonial province of Nueva Galicia.

THE CHICHIMECAS

As the Spaniards and their Amerindian allies from the south made their way into Nueva Galicia early in the Sixteenth Century, they encountered large numbers of nomadic Indians. They referred to these natives as the Chichimecas. This was a derogatory term.

Utilizing the Náhuatl terms for dog (chichi) and rope (mecatl), the Aztecs referred to the Chichimecas literally as "of dog lineage."

The Natives of Jalisco

- **Cocas – Central Jalisco (near Guadalajara and Lake Chapala)**
- **Guachichiles – Northeastern Jalisco, Eastern Zacatecas, and Eastern Aguascalientes, Western Guanajuato**
- **Huicholes – Northwestern Jalisco and Nayarit**
- **Tecuexes – Northern Jalisco (north of Guadalajara)**
- **Caxcanes – Northern Jalisco (Los Altos), Southwestern Zacatecas and Western Aguascalientes**
- **Tepehuanes – Northern Jalisco and large parts of Durango**
- **Purépecha (Tarascans) – Southern Jalisco and large sections of Michoacán**
- **And many more**

The Natives of Jalisco

Disease and war took their toll on the Indians of Jalisco. Between February and June 1530, a large force led by Nuño de Guzmán subdued the indigenous peoples of this area. The inhabitants were then distributed among Spanish encomiendas, which caused great hardship.

In the Mixtón Rebellion of 1540-1541, the powerful Caxcanes and Tecuexes tried to push the Spaniards out of their territory. After great initial success, they were eventually defeated and humiliated. Gradually, in the decades to follow, the Indians of Jalisco assimilated with the Spaniards and Indians from other parts of México. Today, only the Huicholes survive as a cultural entity (mostly in neighboring Nayarit).

The Natives of Zacatecas

- Zacatecos – Western Zacatecas
- Guachichiles – Eastern Zacatecas
- Caxcanes – Southwest Zacatecas
- The Zacatecos and Guachichiles fought the Spaniards in the Chichimeca War (1550-90). They were never decisively defeated but were bribed into making peace. They were also assimilated over time.

Indigenous Mexicans: From Independence to the Present Day

At the time of independence - 1821 to 1825 - the total population of Mexico was 6,800,000. Estimates by Rosenblatt tell us that 54.4% of this population was classified as indigenous.

Most of the later census counts used linguistic criterion:

In 1877, an estimated 39% of Mexico's population spoke indigenous languages. The number of indigenous speakers five years of age and over steadily declined thereafter:

1895: 2,734,715 indigenous speakers (19.08%)

1900: 2,078,914 indigenous speakers (15.28%)

1910: 1,960,306 indigenous speakers (12.93%)

The 1921 Census: A Unique Perspective

Indígena Pura (Of Pure Indigenous Origin) – 4,179,449 people (29.16%)

Indígena Mezclada con Blanca (Indigenous Mixed with White) – 8,504,561 (59.33%)

Blanca (White) – 1,404,718 (9.80%)

Extranjeros sin distincion de razas (Foreigners without racial distinction) – 101,958 (0.71%)

“Cualquiera otra o que se ignora la raza” (Persons who chose to ignore the question or “other” –144,894 (1.0%)

Source: Departamento de la Estadística Nacional, “Anuario de 1930” (Tacubaya, Distrito Federal, 1932).

THE 1921 CENSUS: AN INDICATOR OF MESTIZAJE FOR EACH STATE

States with Largest Percentage of “Indígena Pura” Population	Percent of the Total Population	States with Largest Percentage of Mestizo/Mezclada Population	Percent of the Total Population
Oaxaca	69.17%	Sinaloa	98.30%
Tlaxcala	54.70%	Guanajuato	96.33%
Puebla	54.37%	Durango	89.10%
Chiapas	47.64%	Zacatecas	86.10%
Guerrero	43.84%	Querétaro	80.15%
Campeche	43.41%	Coahuila	77.88%
Yucatán	43.31%	Jalisco	75.83%
México	42.13%	Nuevo León	75.47%
Hidalgo	39.49%	Michoacán	70.59%

The 1921 Census: “Blanca”

The States With the Largest Percentage of “Blanca” Residents	Percent
Sonora	41.85%
Chihuahua	36.33%
Baja California Sur	33.40%
Tabasco	27.56%
Distrito Federal	22.79%
Yucatán	21.85%
Nuevo León	19.23%
Aguascalientes	16.77%
Campeche	14.17%
Tamaulipas	13.54%

Speakers of Indigenous Languages in México (1930 to 1980)

Year	Population of Persons Speaking Indigenous Languages (5 years old or more)	Population of Persons 5 Years old or more)	Percentage of Indigenous Speakers (5 and over)	Total Population
1930	2,251,086	14,042,201	16.0%	16,552,722
1940	2,490,909	16,788,660	14.8%	19,653,552
1950	2,447,609	21,821,026	11.2%	25,791,017
1960	3,030,254	29,146,382	10.4%	34,923,129
1970	3,111,415	40,057,748	7.8%	48,225,238
1980	5,181,038	57,498,965	9.0%	81,249,645

Speakers of Indigenous Languages in México (1990 to 2005)

Year	Population of Persons Speaking Indigenous Languages (5 years old or more)	Population of Persons 5 Years old or more)	Percentage of Indigenous Speakers (5 and over)	Total Population
1990	5,282,347	70,562,202	7.5%	81,249,645
1995	5,483,555	80,434,190	6.8%	91,158,290
2000	6,044,547	84,742,491	7.1%	97,483,412
2005	6,011,202	90,266,425	6.7%	103,263,388

2005: The Most Spoken Languages

Rank	Language	Number of Persons	Percent of Indigenous Speakers	Percent of Speakers Who are Monolingual
1	Náhuatl	1,376,026	22.9%	9.6%
2	Maya	759,000	12.6%	5.4%
3	Mixteco Languages	423,216	7.0%	18.2%
4	Zapoteco Languages	410,901	6.8%	7.4%
5	Tzeltal	371,730	6.2%	27.4%
6	Tzotzil	329,937	5.5%	28.0%
7	Otomí	239,850	4.0%	4.4%
8	Totonaco	230,930	3.8%	12.7%
9	Mazateco	206,559	3.4%	19.5%
All	Mexican Republic	6,011,202	100%	32.2%

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What Do They Call Themselves?

Common Group Name	Self-given Name	Meaning of the Name
Tzeltales	Winik atel	Working Men
Tzotziles	Batsil winik' otik	True Men
Zapotecos de Valles	Ben' zaa	People of the Clouds
Zapotecos de Sierra Norte	Bene xon	People of the Clouds
Zapotecos Istmo	Binnzá	People who come from the Clouds
Mixtecos	Ñuu savi	People of the Rim
Nahua	Macehuale	Campesino
Otomí	Hña hñu	Otomí speakers
Mayos	Yoremes	People of the Shore
Huicholes	Wirráríka	The People
Tarahumara	Rarámuri	Runners on Foot

What Do They Call Themselves?

Common Group Name	Self-given Name	Meaning of the Name
Lacandon	Hach Winik	True Men
Pápago	Thono o'otham	People of the Desert
Pimas	O'ob	The People
Guaríjos	Macurawe	Those who Roam the Earth
Chontales de Oaxaca	Slijuala xanuc'	Inhabitants of the Mountains
Amuzgos	Tzjon non	People of the Textiles
Chochos	Runixa ngiigua	Those Who Speak the Language
Tlapanecos	Me'phaa	He Who is Painted
Totonacos	Totonacos	Man of the Hot Country
Seris	Kon kaak	The People
Huaves	Mero ikooc	The True Us

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- To read more about the various indigenous peoples of México, please see:
- <http://houstonculture.org/mexico/states.html>
- For detailed statistics about the 1921 Mexican census, please see:
- <http://www.houstonculture.org/hispanic/censustable.html>

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