

IN SEARCH OF AZTLAN

Dr. Jack Forbes Interview

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Q: Dr. Forbes, please tell us about the migrations of Native Americans peoples throughout the Americas.

A: From about forty thousand years ago until about eleven or twelve or thirteen thousand years ago, depending on the exact region, a good part of North America was covered with glaciers. The glaciers extended all the way from the Atlantic to the Pacific, across the northern United States and across what is now Canada.

During that period of time, linguistic evidence seems to indicate that most of our native language groups, the ancestors of those language groups, were living south of the ice, because it looks like it took twenty to forty thousand years for the special characteristics of American languages to evolve in relation to Asian and other languages. So during that period of time, the ancestors of all of our native people except probably for the people known as Eskimos and Aleut people, were living south of this ice belt. And most of them were probably living in South America or at least down in Central America, because much of the United States was tundra or taiga--pretty hard to live in. And [their population was] probably pretty sparse.

But as the ice began to melt and the weather began to warm up, the migrations seemed to have been from south to north. Most people don't seem to understand that this is where most of our American ancestors came from. They came from the south moving north rather than coming down from Alaska, where the population was, undoubtedly, very scanty during that period of time.

Eventually, of course, these groups meet. But one of the things that is interesting about some of the new DNA studies and so on, is that it looks like our ancient American peoples--whom I'll just call Americans for short--these Americans had only a very small number of female ancestors. So most of us, whether we're living in the extreme southern part of South America or living in Mexico or in the U.S. or Canada today, are descended from a very small group of female ancestors, and probably an almost equally small group of original male ancestors, as well. So we are all related. All the native people of the Americas are distinctly related with each other. So as time goes by, of course, migrations continue to take place because warming continues, and a lot of other processes occur, which lead people to move. We find very large language families developing, such as the family known as the Uto-Aztecan or Uto-Nahua language family, from whom many modern Mexican people are descended. And these people, apparently, when the Europeans begin to move across the U.S. and Canada, it appears that these peoples are spread out all the way from southern Saskatchewan, maybe Alberta, in the form of people known as Shoshones. [They] are spread all the way out from there clear down into Central America, down into Nicaragua, and possibly

even, in a few instances, farther south than Nicaragua.

So this is a great language family, which spans a little bit of Canada and most of the western United States, and then all the way down into Mexico and Central America. Today of course, we have many different tribes who are descended from this language family. Groups such as the Utes, the Comanches, the Shoshones, many California Indian groups, the Paiutes and others in Nevada. And of course, many different groups in Mexico.

Q: We heard theories that the historical Aztlan may well have been in Nayarit, the immediate precursor to the trip to Mexico City, and yet we found these maps that alluded to possible original sites that predate this in the American Southwest. Could you explain how this might be possible, in terms of what we've known as the succession of migrations?

A: Well, of course, at the time of the Spanish conquest, the field of history was very well developed among the ancient people of what is now central Mexico. They kept track of their own past, year by year. Of course, as time went by, some of it got mixed up a little bit and there were political things that got written in once in a while, but generally speaking it was a pretty profound historical record.

After the conquest, many individuals began writing this history down in Nahuatl as well as in Spanish, and we have texts, such as that of the Codex Chimalpain, which, specifically, states that the Aztec origin, the place of origin, was in what had come to be known as New Mexico, Nuevo Mexico, which at that particular time, would be, basically, the southern United States, considered broadly rather than the present state of New Mexico.

When the first Spanish expeditions began to move north, out of the Valley of Mexico, one of the things that they were very interested in was finding new riches, other Mexicos in the north, and so they want very much to know where the Aztecs came from. They want to know about fabled cities that might still exist in the North where they can find a lot of gold and so on. Every expedition that heads towards the north has large numbers of people who speak Mexicano, or Nahuatl. There are people from other language groups, as well, but the main emphasis is on the Mexican-speaking people because they are used as interpreters with different tribes in the north, and it is assumed, by the Spaniards, that an interpreter in the Mexican language will be of extreme value no matter where they go. As they travel north, for example, the Coronado expedition in 1539, 1540, take many many hundreds if not a thousand or more Mexican-speaking people with them into what comes to be known as Nuevo Mexico. And it is this movement, I believe, which leads to the identification of a number of ruins and other places in the Southwest, as being Casas De Moctezuma houses of Moctezuma, or origin places of the Aztecs or Aztlan. One finds the Spaniards talking about this very frequently in their writings. And not only in the writings of people like Chimalpain, but also in writings of Spanish historians, as well.

Q: Could you tell us about Chimalpain?

A: Chimalpain was a Nahuatl-speaking native person who lived in the area of the city of Mexico in the latter part of the fifteenth century and early sixteenth century. He was one of the main sources of information for other writers who came along later, so it's a very valuable text that he has for us, identifying with Aztlan, with a city in a lake, in the north in an area known today--or at time--as Nuevo Mexico.

But in addition to that kind of information, you have the testimony of the Spaniards as they visit the Southwest, and they mark on their maps, as you're well aware, all of these houses of Montezuma and ruins of the Aztecs. And when we find places like Casas Grandes Chihuahua, and Casa Grande in southern Arizona, this terminology of Casas Grandes is one that is closely associated with this belief that the Aztecs came from that region.

Now the exact places where Uto-Aztecan speaking people migrated from, are not completely known. Because, of course, as I indicated, during the period of glaciation, the language groups were probably much farther south. There was probably a long northward migration, but there could have been many migrations back and forth, in the mean time. We're talking about ten thousand years of movements, and many many different things may have happened. But nonetheless we see, if you look at a map of the Uto-Aztecan family, you will see that they have a very very large territory in the arid sections of the western United States, precisely around the area that is identified on some of the maps as being the homeland of the Aztecs.

Q: Where would you place the other groups that we've come to know as the Anasazi, the Sinaguas and other people, whose ruins we've seen? Did they come after what may have been the precursors to Aztlan, or were they contiguous with them?

A: Well, we do have some information on migrations of many of these groups. The migrations

of the people that come to be known as the Anasazi are relatively recent. In other words, we're talking about [these movements being], say, a thousand years ago, maybe fifteen hundred years ago. There's plenty of room, within the Southwest, for other peoples to have been moving around during the same period of time. For example, we also have the migration records of the Athapaskan-speaking Navajo people and Apache people, taking place in the same areas at the same time. And also adopting people who were probably speakers of other language families into, let us say, the Navajo group, for instance.

But you have to remember that when we're talking about Anasazi or pueblo people, one of the reasons I decided to apply the term Aztlan in 1960 or 1961, to the entire Southwest and northern Mexico, was not just because of my knowledge of the tradition about Aztlan, but also because the native people of a good part of Sonora and part of Chihuahua are also pueblo Indians. And in places like Sahuaripa, for example, in Sonora, you had terraced pueblo

dwelling, very similar to Taos, New Mexico. So when you talk about pueblo Indians, you're talking about people who also extended down into Sonora. And these people were speaking Uto-Aztecan languages. They were speaking branches of the Pima family or the Opata-Tewi family, and so there were still Uto-Aztecs who were pueblo Indians, even in the historic period of European contact.

Q: Given that we know Aztlan was somewhere in the Southwest, is the migration to Tenochtitlan something that would have happened over a short period or a long period of time?

A: Many of the chronicles tend to date the departure of the Aztecs or the Mexitin, as they're called often, from Aztlan at about 1064, [by] our present calendar. One says 1090, I believe. As I recall, it takes about two hundred and eighteen years or two hundred and eighty years--something like that--before they manage to reach the Valley of Mexico. Then, of course, another couple hundred years before they found the great city of Tenochtitlan. So it is a migration according to the records that we have that took a considerable period of time. It could, of course, have actually begun earlier, and those dates may have been set to it later. We don't know, exactly, how accurate those dates are, but I have no reason to challenge them myself, at this point.

Q: It is said that Aztlan is a lake, has seven caves, is a place of whiteness, a place of herons and egrets. Given that, where might Aztlan be located in the Southwest?

A: Well, I think there are several places where one could start out. There was a great city along the coast of Sinaloa, known as Aztlan, and this was a very very large city, which, of course, was depopulated by the Spanish conquest. But it was a large city, not as large as Tenochtitlan, of course, but a city of considerable size, and also the Spaniards marked a river along the coast on some of their maps called the Rio de Aztlan. I place it at about [what we know as] the Rio Yaqui.

These could represent places where the Aztecs stopped and lived for periods of time, left part of their people behind, as they migrated south. I think one of the things that possibly could be done would be a textual analysis of later Aztec Nahuatl to see if there are any words left over from any northern Uto-Aztecan dialects. One might find that there are some relics in the Aztec speech of the late period that will tell a little bit about their history of what their language was formerly like. We know that they abandoned, or at least some of the texts indicate, that they abandoned their former language and adopted the official Nahuatl of the Valley of Mexico, at some time. So they probably were speaking a little bit different dialect before that time. Probably not too different, but maybe some relics could be found. So there are lines of research that could be followed.

In any case, it is quite clear that they are parts of a larger community of what we could call Mexicanic or Uto-Nauhuan peoples, who are in turn a part of a larger group of people we call Native Americans during the 1492 period. We can just call them all Americans and just leave it at that. These are the original Americans.

Q: How did the Spanish explorers of that era construct their maps?

A: Every map maker was a little bit different. There was a lot of copying, of course. They tended to copy other maps. But the thing that tended to drive the map making were reports from the field in diaries, journals. They would look at journals, or sometimes, perhaps, they had access to maps prepared by people who had been out traveling. So a scholar of maps can often tell when the information from a particular expedition finds its way to the map makers, because all of a sudden there are new place names that show up, new rivers, new coast lines, new geographical information. So when you find on a map something about Teguayo and the Aztecs coming from an island and a lake in that area, and so on, that, undoubtably, comes from a very specific source. The source itself may never be found. It may have been destroyed or lost or may have been oral. But we know that some map makers saw a source. Subsequently, of course, it could have been copied, then, by other map makers. But again, you may find new information coming in, as some of the maps will show much more detailed information than the earlier maps. Then you know that somebody else has had some additional information that they've fed in to the map makers.

Q: Could you tell us why, in your book, you see the Chicanos as the northern-most Aztecs.

A: The word Mexicano, from which, I believe, Chicano is derived, from the Nahuatl Mexicano, is a term that all during [the] Colonial Period referred to people who spoke Nahuatl. It is a term that refers to indigenous American people. So that when the, the republic was established, between 1810 and 1821, they were going to adapt the term Anahuac, which again is a native term, referring to the land between arin, but when they finally decided to adopt the term Mexicano, Mexico, they consciously adopted an indigenous name. They consciously identified with themselves, as an indigenous American people. Of course, that was very logical, because, overwhelmingly, the ancestry of the Mexican republican's people is from the original American people. It is estimated about 80% of the genes are derived from original American people.

I grew up in southern California. El Monte. And a lot of my friends, my classmates, the field workers who were in the field next door to my house who came in and drank water from our faucet, I interacted with them all the time, and first started learning Spanish at that time and all these people were brown indigenous people. And so I grew up with an awareness from my earliest

age that people known as Mexicanos and so on, were Indian. Native people. I mean, I never had any doubt about that. And so it always took me as a surprise, later on, when some people began to say well these were whites with Spanish surnames or something like that. I never could quite understand that.

So when we look at the people from Mexico, and the Chicanos--and I should say something about Chicanos. Chicanos have their roots in the Southwest for another reason, too. And that is because many pueblo Indians, many California Indians, and others, through intermarriage, and otherwise, became ancestors of the present Chicano population. The Chicano population doesn't only come from what is now the republic of Mexico. It also stems from what used to be Mexico, north of the border, the present border. And so, in any case, these people are very definitely related to all the other indigenous people and they constitute the largest group. Whereas the Navajo may only number two hundred, three hundred thousand people, you know, the Chicanos number into the millions. And so, obviously, this is the largest group of indigenous people in the United States, today.

Q: Given what you just told us, how would you suggest that the Mexican-Chicano population answer the census?

A: Well, it's very interesting that after a lot of prodding, the federal government and the central organ of the federal government that has control over ethnic definitions, the O.M.B., Office of Management and Budget, has decreed that all persons who have their origin in the people who were here before Columbus, can indicate their identification as American Indian or Alaska Native. In other words, if you have ancestry, and if you have community connections or relations, or if it's important to you that you are descended from pre-Columbian Americans, then you can check the American Indian/Alaska Native box on the 2000 census.

Now this is the first time that has really been open to native people from South America, Meso America, Central America, and it specifically says, people from South America and Central America in the new definition. And so it is interesting what will happen is that of course under the 2000 census, Chicanos can check all of their racial ancestry. If they want to check American Indian because they have indigenous Mexican ancestry, they can check that. If they want to check Caucasian, because they have some Spanish ancestry or something, they can check that. If they have African ancestry, they can check that. So they can check more than one. But it definitely gives Chicanos the opportunity to fully embrace their indigenous ancestry if they choose to do so. And, of course, that's quite separate from the Hispanic/Spanish origin question, which is a different question that will be on the census.

Q: And this is for hereafter, not just simply the 2000 census?

A: Presumably, it will be for the hereafter. Though one never knows how long it will last. But for now, it looks permanent.

Q: In 1961, you wrote an article that pinpointed Aztlan not simply as a site but rather a whole region. Can you explain why you put forth that theory?

A: Well, I was aware of the tradition that the Aztecas had migrated from Aztlan. And I was also aware of some of the other things that we've talked about today, namely that the maps and other things showed the homeland as being north of the present Mexican border. I was, at that time, very interested in the fact that northwestern Mexico and the southwestern United States really constitutes a single region in terms of geography. It's mostly a desert area, very similar native cultural traditions, overlapping language boundaries, the common history, of course, of all of the modern peoples living there. And as a result, I decided to try to come up with a name that could be used to refer to that region, because Southwest, obviously, is a ethnocentric term, northwest, also, is not accurate if you include the U.S. area. So it came to me to call this region Aztlan, and so I thought it was a large enough region that it would certainly embrace the original Aztlan. So that's why I did it. That was about 1961, 1962, when we had the Native American movement in southern California, which attempted to bring together indigenous people from north of the boundary and south of the boundary in one movement.

Q: In 1965 you wrote a book called Aztecas of the North and it wasn't published for several years thereafter. Is there a reason that it was not published immediately?

A: Well, I queried many publishers, Eastern publishers, Chicago, New York, and so on. And at that time, it appeared that no one was interested in publishing a book about Mexican Americans. Perhaps my book was a little too radical, in any case. They didn't think there was a market for it. Which I thought was incredible, but it had to wait till 1973 before I could find a publisher. So I think that's the main reason: they just didn't think there was a market; they were very Eastern oriented. And, I think, this trend continues today, in the New York publishing industry, where there's very little interest in the Southwest and Chicanos and so on. It seems to me.

Q: Eight years after you wrote this notion of Aztlan as being the Southwest, the Denver Youth Conference, in 1969, adopted the idea as the rallying cry of the Chicano people. How did you feel about that?

A: I thought it was fantastic, but at that time, I was extremely active in many native movements, and I was of course following what was happening in the Chicano community very closely, and so it just seemed to me one of many logical things that were happening at that particular period of time. But I thought, of course, that it was so great that the MEChA, and other elements in the Chicano community were developing this concept of a homeland in the north.

Q: Can you explain why the maps you have made are so unconventional?

A: Well, of course, the north-south maps that we have are Euro-centric maps. They're designed because, of course, Western Europe dominated the Colonial Period, and they drew the maps always with Western Europe in the center, or at the north, and as you know they also made Europe bigger than it should be in relation to other continents, and so on. So around 1970 or 1971, I started making some maps that were turned around, where South America is at the top of the map. Patagonia, Tierra le Fuego, and so on, is up at the top of the map, and it goes down with Canada at the bottom of the map. I was very interested in seeing that the Carribean becomes like the Mediterranean of America.

Then I also experimented, recently, with maps, having them face towards the sunrise, towards the dawn. Why not have them face towards the sunrise direction. And when you turn a map to face the sunrise direction, you really can get the feel for how Yucatan moves very easily along with the currents, all the way to the mouth of the Mississippi and Louisiana. And of course this helps to explain why you have, within the United States, great Mexican type cities, such as Kahokia, Moundville, and many others, with pyramids, and so on, that resemble, very closely, the pyramids that you find developing in Central Mexico, and also, of course, in coastal Peru. What we really have is a unity, in many ways, in the continent, and in the continent's history. We know, for example, that there was regular trade between coastal Peru and the coast of Nayarit, using rafts with sails, probably balsa type rafts, but there was a regular trade over a very very long period of time.

My own research has shown that the native people in the Gulf of Mexico, and the Carribean, were using sails, making very very large vessels, holding up to as many as ninety men in them, sometimes with the decks covered with wood, so that a cabin could be built on top of the deck, and of course carrying freight. Columbus, himself, ran into a Maya boat of the type on one of his trips around Yucatan. So [a] great deal of movement took place by water. We know that. A great deal took place by water. We had lots of seagoing Indian people during that period of time.

Q: Could you tell us about some significant Native, North American sites that echo architecture as a result of communication between what we now know as Central American Aztecs/Mayans?

A: There's a great deal of continuity between the development, archeologically, of pyramids and planned cities, ball courts and things like that, between Meso America and the Andian, Peruvian, region in the south, and also, the Mississippi Valley and other areas, in what is now the United States. We have many great cities in North America that [are] of Meso-American type, such as Kahokia, which is a huge city, probably had forty or fifty thousand people at least, from about 1200 to 1500, on our present calendar. [It was] surrounded also by forty or so smaller cities, and another

very large city in southern Indiana called Angel, of a similar type. And this particular city of Cahokia has a marker that has what looks like the Maya symbol for time, or the sun, that was found, buried in the ground near what was probably the little observatory. And of course it has the pyramids that are of Meso-American type. But these pyramids actually may have begun in southern Louisiana. The oldest pyramids in Americas, the oldest mounds, I should say, are found in Louisiana about 5000 years ago. And from there they spread to the coast of Peru, and the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, of Mexico, in what comes to be known as the Olmeca region, or what I call Tollan, because this is the ancient name for that region. Tollan is an area of complex culture in the Mediterranean of America. And of course, eventually, when we get away from this ethnocentric Anglo-centric kind of history that's taught in the United States, eventually, North American history will begin with the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico, and this region of high culture as it develops all around these waters. And develops as a continuity, and is the heritage, of course, of all of us in North America today.

Q: You've stressed the importance of maps throughout your work. Given the power of maps, what do you think is the importance of the maps we're discovering today?

A: Well, I think that the maps that you've found and that others have found are going to be extremely important. Because they tend to bear out several things. One is, of course, the unity of the indigenous people. The fact that the present political boundaries have not been boundaries for very long. And that these boundaries should not interfere with our relationship to each other, and I'm talking about not only indigenous nations, but also of course of other peoples who live in America today. America, of course, is not the United States. America is the entire continent. And I think that's another thing that we must make very very clear, is that there never was any America except the entire continent, until very very recent times. America may also be an indigenous term, incidentally. Perhaps not derived from Amerigo Vespucci, but I won't go any farther with that today. But, in any event, I think that the maps help us to understand that the peoples known as Mexican-Americans, Chicanos, and so on, have their roots in what is now the United States. And whether that's back thousands of years, or whether it's only back to 1064, they help to reinforce that knowledge of basic origin and relatedness.

Q: Go ahead and tell us about the origin of the word "America."

A: Well, there is a very early map, I forget the exact date. But I think it's about 1507, something like that, which shows an island, just off the coast of Venezuela, probably, supposed to be Nicaragua, but they think it's an island at that point, because they haven't yet been along Central America to see that it's part of the mainland. And it's called T. Amaracay. Some people would say it's Tamaracay, but probably it stands for Tierra Amaracay, or T-A

could be Tierra Maracay. I have a theory that the term America comes from Maraca. We have lots of place names all around the Carribean, such as Maraca Yu, Maracaibo, Amaraca, which come from the word Maraca, basically, which is the gourd. And the gourd is very important because a lot of people in the Carribean believe that was one of the origins of human beings, that human beings came out of a gourd. And, of course, it's central to the ceremonies of the area, and also North America and South America are both shaped like gourds. Isn't that interesting? Of course, there was a mountain range in Nicaragua, known as the Sierra Americay. And some people believe that the name America comes from Americay, the mountain range. of course, others still believe that it comes from Amerigo Vaspucci, but the problem with that is that most documents have him known as Alberico Vaspucci, not Amerigo, so the question still isn't settled of where the name America comes from. But in any case, it was first applied to the region of present day Venezuela and Columbia and Nicaragua, later to the entire continent, and the only people who were known as Americans for hundreds and hundreds of years were the native people.