NO PREP

Descendant Communities Today

Living Heritage of the Americas

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Descendant Communities Today: Living Heritage of the Americas

The Heritage That Did Not End

In standard archaeology textbooks, the Aztec and Inca appear as ancient civilizations — objects of study, subjects of past tense sentences, civilizations that rose and fell. This framing has a significant problem: it is wrong. The descendants of both empires are alive, in large numbers, maintaining languages, cultural practices, and connections to their ancestral territories. Nahuatl — the language of the Aztec — is spoken

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The Heritage That Did Not End

In standard archaeology textbooks, the Aztec and Inca appear as ancient civilizations: objects of study, subjects of past tense sentences, civilizations that rose and fell. This framing has a significant problem: it is wrong. The descendants of both empires are alive, in large numbers, maintaining languages, cultural practices, and connections to their ancestral territories. Nahuatl, the language of the Aztec, is spoken today by approximately 1.5 million people in Mexico. Quechua, the administrative language of the Inca Empire, has between 6 and 9 million speakers across Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, and Argentina. These are not small remnant populations. They are significant communities whose relationship to the archaeological past is not academic but personal and political. This reality fundamentally changes how we should think about Aztec and Inca archaeology. When a site is excavated, the people most directly affected are not archaeologists in universities, but communities whose ancestors built the site and whose cultural identity is bound up in it. When artifacts are displayed in museums in New York or London or Berlin, the people with the deepest stake in those objects are not the museum's donors but the communities from which the objects came. This is not a new insight (Indigenous communities have been saying it for generations), but it has taken a long time for academic archaeology to take it seriously as a methodological and ethical principle.

What Nahua Communities Are Doing

In Mexico, Nahua communities, the modern descendants of the Aztec and related Nahuatl-speaking peoples, have been increasingly active in asserting their rights over ancestral heritage. This includes advocacy around specific repatriation cases, participation in archaeological site management, and legal challenges to excavation

permits that were granted without community consultation. The Mexican government's National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH), which controls archaeological heritage in Mexico, has a complex relationship with Indigenous communities: it often protects sites from looting and development, but it also sometimes acts as a gatekeeper that limits community access to their own heritage. Community-based archaeology projects in the Nahua-speaking regions of Mexico have begun to demonstrate an alternative model. In these projects, local community members are trained as excavators, interpreters, and site managers. Research questions are developed in consultation with community members rather than imposed by outside researchers. Findings are shared with the community in accessible formats before they are published in academic journals. The results have been positive both archaeologically (community members often have knowledge of local landscape, oral traditions, and site locations that academic researchers lack) and politically, building community investment in site protection.

What Quechua Communities Are Doing

In the Andes, Quechua communities face some of the most acute heritage conflicts in the world. The region's extraordinary concentration of Inca sites means that development projects (mining, road construction, dam building) constantly threaten archaeological material. Quechua communities living on or near these sites often have the most direct knowledge of their extent and significance, and the most direct stake in their protection. They also frequently have the least political power in the systems that grant permits and approve projects. Community-based responses have varied. In some areas, Quechua communities have formed their own heritage monitoring organizations that document threats and report to national and international authorities. In others, community members have trained as archaeologists through partnerships with Peruvian and international universities, creating a generation of researchers who study their own ancestral heritage. The concept of community archaeology in the Andes is increasingly recognized by international bodies including UNESCO, which has incorporated community consultation into its World Heritage Site management requirements for sites in Indigenous territories.

Indigenous Archaeologists: A Changing Field

Perhaps the most significant development in the study of Aztec and Inca archaeology in recent decades has been the emergence of Indigenous archaeologists — researchers who are themselves members of descendant communities and who bring dual perspectives to their work. An Indigenous archaeologist studying Inca sites in Peru is simultaneously a trained scientist operating within international methodological standards and a person whose family history is bound up in the material they are studying. This dual position is both a strength and a source of tension. Indigenous archaeologists often report that their community membership gives them access to knowledge and trust that outside researchers cannot obtain. A Quechua archaeologist may know local oral traditions about a site, have family connections that open doors in consultation processes, and understand the cultural significance of specific objects or practices in ways that academic training alone cannot provide. They also report pressure from both sides: from academic institutions that expect them to maintain 'scientific objectivity,' and from communities that expect them to prioritize community interests over publication timelines.

Ongoing Battles: Mining, Tourism, and Control

The most urgent day-to-day heritage conflicts facing descendant communities are not abstract debates about museum display — they are battles over land, mining permits, and tourism revenue. In Peru, the lithium and copper deposits underlying parts of the Andes overlap significantly with Inca archaeological zones. Mining companies, often backed by international capital, have applied for exploration and extraction permits in these areas. Communities have mounted legal challenges, demonstrations, and international advocacy campaigns to block or modify these projects. Tourism presents a different set of tensions. Machu Picchu receives thousands of visitors per day — a number that has caused significant deterioration and has led to ongoing debates about limiting access. The revenue from Machu Picchu tourism goes largely to the Peruvian national government, with local Quechua communities receiving a fraction. Community organizations have argued for revenue-sharing arrangements that would allow them to invest in local infrastructure and heritage education. The Peruvian government has made incremental changes but has not fundamentally restructured the revenue distribution.

Key Information: Descendant Communities and Living Heritage

Topic	Key Information
Nahuatl Speakers Today	Approximately 1.5 million speakers in Mexico; descendants of the Aztec and related peoples
Quechua Speakers Today	6-9 million speakers across Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, Argentina
INAH (Mexico)	National Institute of Anthropology and History; controls Mexican archaeological heritage
Community Archaeology Benefits	Local knowledge, oral tradition, site location data; community investment in protection
Key Andes Conflict	Mining and development permits in areas overlapping Inca archaeological zones
Machu Picchu Tourism	Thousands of visitors per day; revenue goes primarily to national government, not local Quechua communities
UNESCO Change	Community consultation now required for World Heritage Site management in Indigenous territories
Indigenous Archaeologists	Dual-perspective researchers: scientific training plus community membership and cultural knowledge
Repatriation Status	Ongoing; major cases include Yale/Machu Picchu (resolved 2010-12), many cases still pending
Core Principle	Descendant communities are stakeholders, not just subjects — heritage decisions should include them

Case Study: Dr. Flores and the Two Audiences

Dr. Carmen Flores is a Quechua archaeologist from Urubamba, Peru, and she has been excavating a newly identified Inca administrative site in the Sacred Valley for two years. The site contains well-preserved storage structures (qollqas), offering deposits, and the remains of what appears to be a mid-level administrative complex that has not been described in the historical record. She is preparing two versions of her findings simultaneously. The first is a technical paper for the Journal of Archaeological Science, which requires peer-reviewed documentation of her methodology, comparative analysis of ceramic assemblages, and isotope data from organic remains. It will be read by perhaps 300 specialists worldwide. The second is a presentation for the community of Huilloc, whose members have been her primary field assistants and whose oral traditions describe this area as a place of significance. She will deliver this one in Quechua, in the community meeting hall, with photographs and physical replicas of the most significant objects. It will be attended by perhaps 80 people, most of whom have never read an academic journal and have no need to. She considers the two documents equally important. She is more nervous about the second one.

1. Why might Dr. Flores be more nervous about her community presentation than her academic paper, even though the academic paper will be judged by expert reviewers? What different kinds of accountability are involved in each audience?

2. The reading argues that descendant communities are stakeholders, not just subjects. How does Dr. Flores's work model this principle in practice, and what challenges does the dual-audience approach create for an Indigenous archaeologist?

Multiple Choice

1. Why is it inaccurate to describe the Aztec and Inca as purely 'ancient civilizations'?

a) Archaeological evidence shows the empires never truly collapsed but simply changed their capitals

b) Both civilizations survived the Spanish conquest with their political structures largely intact

c) Their descendant communities, numbering millions of people, maintain languages and cultural practices today

d) The Spanish conquest occurred too recently to classify the Aztec and Inca as ancient civilizations by scholars

2. What advantage do Indigenous archaeologists bring to research on their own ancestral heritage?

a) They are exempt from normal academic review requirements, allowing faster publication

b) They receive preferential access to government archaeological permits in their home regions more than other researchers

c) Their work is automatically protected from criticism by academic institutions

d) Their community membership gives them access to local knowledge, oral traditions, and trust not available to outsiders

3. What is the core criticism descendant communities make about Machu Picchu tourism revenue?

a) The number of tourists is damaging the site faster than it can be preserved

b) Revenue goes primarily to the national government rather than to local Quechua communities

c) The site is marketed in ways that misrepresent Inca culture to international tour visitors

d) Tourism companies are controlled by foreign corporations with no ties to Peru

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Nahuatl	A) An Inca storage structure; well-preserved examples were found at Dr. Flores's Sacred Valley site
2. ___ INAH	B) An approach to archaeological research developed in collaboration with descendant communities, sharing research questions and findings
3. ___ Community archaeology	C) The combination of scientific training and community membership that Indigenous archaeologists bring to their research
4. ___ Qollqa	D) The language of the Aztec, still spoken by approximately 1.5 million people in Mexico today
5. ___ Dual perspective	E) Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History, which controls archaeological heritage in Mexico

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Quechua — the administrative language of the Inca Empire — has between _____ million speakers today across Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, and Argentina.

2. Community archaeology projects have demonstrated that local community members often have knowledge of _____, oral traditions, and site locations that academic researchers working from outside cannot access.

3. Machu Picchu receives thousands of visitors per day, a number that has caused significant site _____ and ongoing debates about limiting access.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. The reading says the 'past tense framing' of Aztec and Inca as ancient civilizations 'has a significant problem: it is wrong.' Explain why, using specific evidence from the reading.

2. Describe two specific tensions that Indigenous archaeologists face when studying their own ancestral heritage, and explain why these tensions are difficult to resolve.

3. This is the final reading in Unit 9. Reflecting on everything you have learned about the Aztec and Inca, why is it important to study these civilizations through both archaeology and the perspectives of their living descendants rather than through historical documents alone?