

The Aztecs is often viewed as a seminal piece of *Doctor Who*¹. It is also very much Barbara's story. Barbara, when mistaken for the priest/god Yetaxa, attempts to remove the blood sacrifice element of the Aztecs' culture. She fails because it is a "fated" fixed point — a timeline that can't be altered. Though writer John Lucarotti contributed a historically sound script for *The Aztecs*, the story is still within a framework of "good" and "bad" Indians. This is, in fact, a dichotomy we see represented much later in *Black Orchid*, which divides South American tribes of the 1920s into "good" and "bad" Indians; conveniently for the plot, the hero/villain George Cranbeigh has been mutilated and maddened by the "bad" tribe. This dichotomous concept is introduced in the journal of Christopher Columbus and developed by conqueror of the Aztecs, Hernán Cortés².

Although the High Priest of Knowledge in *The Aztecs* is Autloc not Moctezuma, like almost all subsequent writing about this period, the serial takes its lead from the Quetzacóatl myth we first hear about in Cortés' *Second Letter*. We as astute readers and viewers should be suspicious of accepting this myth because there really is no evidence to suggest its validity other than Cortés' word, which judicious reading throws into some doubt. The main goal of Cortés' *Letters from Mexico* to King Charles was to establish the justice of his command. Cortés was in a tight spot as he composed these letters — he had committed treason, ignoring a last minute recall from his expeditionary mission. It is difficult but advantageous to separate the historical Moctezuma from the character presented by Cortés for King Charles' benefit in the *Second Letter*. In it, Cortés repeatedly cited Divine intervention in his success at subduing the Aztec empire, emphasizing the role of the semi-Divine king in this statement. Cortés records Moctezuma as saying, "See that I am of flesh and blood like you and all other men, and I am mortal and substantial."³ However, it is difficult to imagine such a Christianized discourse coming from the lips of the pagan Moctezuma; Anthony Pagden in his notes goes so far as to say, "Motecucoma could never have held the views with which Cortés accredits him."⁴

In *The Aztecs*, Autloc's unfailing ability to accept everything that Barbara-as-Yetaxa says, despite supposedly being representative of reason and intellect, chimes with the way Cortés represented Moctezuma. This also seems to have been an influence on Barbara's transformation from Yetaxa the priest to Yetaxa the demi-god.⁵ Cortés says that Moctezuma and his people accept and welcome Cortés and his men as a representative or reincarnation of the Aztec deity Quetzacóatl. It could be that Cortés is referring to an actual Aztec myth, the legend of the Aztecs' principal god, Huitzilopochtli, but even if Moctezuma offered Cortés the ceremonial regalia of Quetzacóatl at the time of his landing it doesn't necessarily mean that he thought that the stranger was, or represented, the god.⁶ Tlotoxl in "*The Aztecs*" similarly does not accept Barbara-as-Yetaxa's "divinity."

To the Western mind, John Ringham's performance as High Priest of Sacrifice Tlotoxl evokes nothing so much as Shakespeare's *Richard III*. That eponymous anti-hero's evil nature is summed up in his limp, his hunchback, and his leer, all of which Tlotoxl seems to share, with the added bonus of black face paint or tattooing. Tlotoxl is at the center of the "good/bad Indian" dichotomy; his physical ugliness makes him both antagonist to our heroes' intentions and the representative of that "barbaric" practice of human sacrifice, which is, in fact, very similar to the treatment of the "*canibale*" Indians whom Columbus encountered.

Peter Hulme supplies a strong theory for why it might have been to Columbus' advantage to make the distinction between tribes that "seemed" timid and the tribe that actively resisted. After being privately assured that there are no "Oriental courts" to be found on the new continent, Columbus reverts to the "Herodotean discourse of savagery."⁷ In general, he praises the beauty of the peoples he meets, but there is one person who is described disparagingly, ugly because of "extrinsic cultural features."⁸ This individual just happens to be part of the tribe said to eat other people—"Columbus 'judges' that the native is a man-eating Caribe."⁹ How convenient is it that the tribe that attacks Columbus' men is the one that Columbus paints as cannibals?¹⁰ Tlotoxl is not lovely to look upon and thus makes an excellent scapegoat for all the sins of the Aztecs.

Despite her aspirations toward objectivism in being a history teacher, Barbara's crusade to rehabilitate the Aztecs shows her to be at least influenced by the motif of the noble savage. The concept of the noble savage—the native in a prelapsarian state of innocence and purity — in some form arrives with Columbus, but it was French Protestant Jean de Léry who in 1553 described his intention "simply to declare what I have myself experienced . . . among the American savages."¹¹

Annotator Janet Whatley notes that “savage” stands in here for the French *sauvage*, “the word [that] most often means simply ‘living in a state of nature.’”¹² The linguistic distinction is an important one, especially in light of de Léry’s Spanish predecessors, who referred to the natives as *los indios*. Yet by using the word *sauvage*, de Léry highlighted his Calvinist duty to convert a people “with almost no religion.”¹³

For many viewers of “*The Aztecs*,” the serial is their first glimpse into a historical pre-Columbian civilization and as such, it is an admirable introduction. Nevertheless, it is colored by the calculated writings of Cortés and his contemporaries. “Oh, don’t you see?” cries Barbara to the Doctor. “If I could start the destruction of everything that’s evil here, then everything that’s good will survive when Cortés lands.” All that is good is in the eye of the beholder.

¹ It has the distinction of being the first time the Doctor has romantic inclinations; serves as a template for understanding the cumulative effects of time travel; and is held up as an example of the “Pure Historicals.” See Paul Cornell, Martin Day, Keith Topping, et al. “BBC — Doctor Who Classic Episode Guide — ‘The Aztecs’” (1995-2003). *Doctor Who: The Classic Series*. Retrieved 21 January 2012 at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/doctorwho/classic/episodeguide/aztecs/detail.shtml>, and Shannon Patrick Sullivan, “Serial F The Aztecs” (3 April 2005). *A Brief History of Time*. Retrieved 21 January 2012 at <http://www.shannonsullivan.com/drwho/serials/f.html>.

² With Yetaxa’s death around 1430 and Cortés’ arrival in 1519, Lucarotti’s novelization’s date of 1507 is plausible. See Tat Wood and Lawrence Miles, *About Time 1: The Unauthorized Guide to Doctor Who, 1963-1966, Seasons 1 to 3*, Des Moines, IL: Mad Norwegian Press, 2006, 70.

³ Hernán Cortés, *Letters from Mexico*, Translated and edited by Anthony Pagden, with an introduction by J H Elliott, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986, *Second Letter*, 86.

⁴ Pagden, Introduction to *Letters from Mexico*, 467.

⁵ See 68-71 of Wood and Miles, *About Time 1*.

⁶ Ross Frank, “The Codex Cortés: Inscribing the Conquest of Mexico,” *Dispositio* 14.36-38 (1989): 200.

⁷ Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1797*, London: Methuen, 1986, 31-33.

⁸ Hulme *Colonial Encounters*, 40.

⁹ Hulme *Colonial Encounters*, 40.

¹⁰ Christopher Columbus, *The Four Voyages: Being His Own Log-Book, Letters and Dispatches with Connecting Narratives*, Translated and edited by J M Cohen, New York: Penguin Classics, 1992, *Journal* 22.

¹¹ Jean De Léry, *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil*, translation and introduction by Janet Whatley, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, 3.

¹² Whatley, Notes to *History of a Voyage*, 232.

¹³ De Léry, *History of a Voyage*, xxx.