

BOOK REVIEW

Aztec Medicine, Health, and Nutrition. Bernard R. Ortiz de Montellano. New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 1990. Pp. xvi, 308. 2 maps, 19 illustrations, 24 tables. ISBN 0-8135-1562-9. \$40.00 (Hardcover), \$15.00 (Paper).

The knowledge of bioactive properties of the varied flora of Mexico was extraordinarily well developed. In fact, the Aztec possessed undoubtedly a wider and probably a much more practical ethnopharmacological acquaintance with their flora than their conquerors had of the plants of Europe. Their interest went far beyond the presumed medicinal value of plants and included ideas concerning nutrition and health in general.

It is fortunate that amongst the Spanish conquerors there were a few individuals whose educational level permitted them to show an interest in native life and customs and an intrinsic interest in what the conquered society could offer. It is to these men that we owe much of our present knowledge of the great civilization of Mexico. Many of these men were ecclesiastics such as Sahagún, but perhaps the best prepared chronicler was Dr. Francisco Hernandez, personal physician to the King of Spain, who was sent to study over a period of several years the medicinal plants of the Aztecs.

Dr. Ortiz de Montellano has published a masterly treatise on the medicine and ideas of nutrition and health of the Aztec. I cannot recall any volume so thoroughly inclusive of this most significant ethnopharmacological aspect of the great civilization that was all but destroyed by the Spanish invaders. Ortiz has not only faithfully searched documents written by Sahagún, Hernandez, and others, but has reported the Aztec monuments, paintings, and other archaeological remains and has given us the interpretation of their message concerning medical, health, and nutritional beliefs.

The book is profusely illustrated. There are eight chapters: 1) Aztec culture; 2) Aztec religion; 3) Population and carrying power of Mexico's basin; 4) Diet and food sources; 5) Epidemiology; 6) Diagnosing and ideas of illness; 7) Curing; and 8) Syncretism in Mexican folk-medicine. The two appendices discuss nutritional values and amino acid content of Aztec medicinal plants. There follow six pages of detailed notes, 25 pages of bibliography, and a detailed index of 15 pages that makes it easy for the reader to find the wealth of interdisciplinary information presented in the book.

Ortiz is to be highly complemented; many investigators will thank him for such a valuable contribution to historical ethnobotany. And we shall all be grateful to the Rutgers University Press for publishing in a paperback edition such a significant piece of research.

Richard Evans Schultes
Harvard Botanical Museum
Cambridge, Massachusetts