Tata and Nene and the Fourth Sun

The Nahua (Aztecs) · the Valley of Mexico

Where It Comes From

The Nahua peoples of central Mexico, the Aztecs among them, taught that the world had already been made and destroyed four times. Each age was called a Sun. We live in the fifth.

This story comes from the “Legend of the Suns”, a text in the Nahuatl language dated 1558, part of a manuscript called the *Codex Chimalpopoca*. It was written by Nahua scholars after the Spanish conquest. The original has been lost since the twentieth century, but copies and photographs survive. John Bierhorst translated it into English in 1992.

What Happens

The fourth Sun is called Nahui Atl, “4 Water”. After hundreds of years, it ends in a flood. The sky falls, the water covers everything, and the people of that age become fish.

Before the flood, the god Titlacahuan (Tezcatlipoca) speaks to a man and a woman, Tata and Nene. He tells them to hollow out a great cypress tree and get inside. He seals them in and tells them they may eat only one ear of corn.

When the water goes down, they come out. They find fish, make a fire, and roast them.

Two star gods see the smoke rising into heaven and are angry. Tezcatlipoca comes down and punishes the couple for making fire without leave: he turns them into dogs.

What Stands Out

Why the flood came. The fourth age of the world came to its end. Ages end in this teaching; it is how the world goes.

Who was saved, and how. Tata and Nene, a man and a woman, warned by a god.

The boat or the refuge. A hollow cypress log, sealed shut.

What came after. The survivors break the god's rule, and are changed into dogs. The world waits for the fifth Sun, our own.

Notice that being saved is not the end of their test. The couple survive the flood, then lose everything for one act of disobedience. Many flood stories are as interested in what people do afterward as in how they escape.

THINK IT THROUGH

Tata and Nene were saved, and then lost it through one careless choice. Why do you think the story doesn't simply end when they are safe?

Sources

John Bierhorst, trans., *History and Mythology of the Aztecs: The Codex Chimalpopoca* (University of Arizona Press, 1992), “Legend of the Suns”.

“El Sol de Nahui Atl”, *Arqueología Mexicana*, on the Fourth Sun, Tata and Nene, and the dates.

Everything here is a summary in our own words. Where a story has many tellings, we follow the source named above and say so.