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AZTEC AMPHITHEATER RECREATES
VANISHED PAST AT HEMISFAIR '68

There's an Aztec amphitheater at HemisFair '68 -- an anachronism in the world of modern architecture, but a fitting site for a ritual that is almost as old as the American continent.

While the rest of the San Antonio World's Fair pays tribute to the cultures that created America, the Frito-Lay/Pepsi-Cola Pavilion actually makes that past breathe again -- with a re-creation of a rain dance that dates back to pre-Columbian days.

The rain dance -- performed by Totonac Indian flyers of Papantla, Mexico -- is HemisFair's entertainment spectacular, involving human "birds" flying through space around a 114-foot pole, to the accompaniment of a chanting chief and feather-clad human pinwheels. There's even a maiden "sacrifice" at the start of the ceremony, and a processional replete with primitive symbols that were sacred 400 years ago.

The symbols of the dance -- and of the culture from which it came -- are everywhere in the amphitheater-pavilion.

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Aztec Amphitheater at HemisFair -- 2.

Early Totonacs believed that life could not be sustained without the male principle of fire and the female principle of water; the first is present at the Aztec entertainment in the form of flaring torchlights held in traditional stone urns, while water encircles the base of the pole.

Tlaloc himself -- the rain god to whom the dance was originally performed -- is actually a presence in the pageant, where his image has a place of honor.

Even the costumes are traditional -- incorporating the authentic feathers and bird symbols that helped the Indians to "fly". While the towering pole they fly from is changed -- originally, it was simply the tallest tree in the Papantla area, probably no more than fifty feet high -- the ritual rain dance remains the same, and the chief still accompanies himself on a reed flute and primitive skin drum.

Although no written documents, or building blueprints, survive from the Aztec past, Dallas architect Cerf Stanford Ross had plenty of points of reference in rebuilding a long-dead world. The Indians themselves, it appears, were his best helpers -- since the ancient traditions have never fully died out among the Totonac tribesmen. As a matter of fact, no architect ever had so many helpers.

What results is a large helping of excitement -- for explorers revisiting the past at HemisFair '68.