

Human Sacrifice at Tenochtitlan

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Many fixed and movable festivals in ancient Mexico were occasions for human sacrifice. The sun in particular was offered hearts and blood, ostensibly because its vitality and, therefore, life itself depended on such oblations. Numerous festivals also included ritual cannibalism, apparently because it was thought to facilitate communion with the gods.

Some scholars suggest that religious motives account for Aztec ritual activity (Caso 1958; Ortiz de Montellano 1978; Sahlins 1978). Others, perhaps dismissing religious rationale as mere mystification, postulate practical though unintentional functions: human sacrifice and cannibalism, they aver, were a means of population control (Cook 1946; Price 1978) or a way of adding amino acids to the stewpot (Harner 1977; Harris 1977). Actually, neither approach is satisfactory; the one takes religious ideas for granted, whereas the other ignores them altogether. As a result, both schools of thought tend to disregard what Abner Cohen (1969) has called social anthropology's central problem: the dialectic of symbolism and power relations.

Various students of ancient Mexico have noticed, if only in passing, that human sacrifice was an instrument of political repression (see Demarest and Conrad 1983; Katz 1972; Kurtz 1978; Padden 1967; Séjourné 1956). In this article I show that this is not an incidental finding but rather an important key to the social meaning of pre-Hispanic religion. Whatever else it may have been, human sacrifice was a symbolic expression of political domination and economic appropriation and, at the same time, a means to their social production and reproduction. The images of the gods reified superordination (and subordination), and sacrifice to them was symbolically equivalent to payment of tribute. The sacrificing of slaves and war captives and the offering of their hearts and blood to the sun thus encoded the essential character of social hierarchy and imperial order and provided a suitable instrument for intimidating and punishing insubordination.

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POLITICAL ECONOMY

Society in ancient Mexico was structured in terms of kinship and domination. Ramages or conical clans called *calpultin* (pl.) varied in size and power and were themselves internally differentiated by rank (see Wolf 1959: 136). The highest position within a *calpulli* (sing.) was occupied by a *calpultéotl*, a god who was deemed a patron and probably an ancestor. One or more noble lineages made up the elite human core of a *calpulli* (Carrasco 1976a, 1976b; Rounds 1979), while farmers and artisans (and, in some cases, merchants) composed its cadet or collateral elements. These might include indigenous commoner lineages having less direct ties to the god as well as various immigrants, whose links with the core membership and god were bound to be even more tenuous. In the urban settlements of the Valley of Mexico, a high proportion of the commoners consisted of such immigrants.¹ In Tenochtitlan, the dominant community in the Aztec empire, the various *calpultin* were grouped into four large wards.

The superiority of the nobles was based in part on their close affiliation with the clan gods, the major gods of the four wards, and, ultimately, the patron deity of the entire tribe. Among the Tenocha-Mexica, this patron was the solar deity Huitzilopochtli, a god of war. Like gods, the nobles wore cotton mantles, fine skin sandals, and jewelry, and they consumed human flesh. The commoners, by contrast, did not dress like the gods or share in cannibalistic meals (Durán 1967: I, 108, 116).

Noble status was heritable but generally required legitimation through feats of bravery in battle. This predication of elite status on service in war was the point of the Mexica legend about the rebellion against the dominant community of Azcapotzalco: the commoners, it was said, were too fearful to revolt and even wanted to flee the city, but Itzcoatl, the Mexica ruler, sought their support by promising that they could eat the nobles on dirty and broken plates should the rebellion fail. Reassured, the commoners vowed that in the event of victory they would pay the nobles tribute, farm the nobles' fields and build their houses, offer to the nobles their daughters, sisters, and nieces, and carry the nobles' baggage and weapons on the roads to war. Following the victory over Azcapotzalco, certain relatives of Itzcoatl (i.e., nobles) were commended for their bravery, and most of the lands appropriated from Azcapotzalco were taken by Itzcoatl or awarded to the nobles. The *calpultin* were given plots for the support of their temples, but only a few unusually courageous commoners received shares of land (Durán 1967: II, 79–84). The identification of nobles as warriors continued under the reigns of subsequent rulers. Moctezuma I even

¹ Frederic Hicks (1982) doubts that the *calpulli* in the Valley of Mexico was a clan (see also Reyes García 1979, cited by Hicks). This conclusion seems somewhat overstated, however. The presence of nonagnates and fictive agnates in the *calpulli* is not inconsistent with what occurs in lineage-based societies.

prohibited nobles from buying fine clothing, jewelry, and high-status weaponry in the market, commanding instead that such items be distributed to deserving nobles as spoils of battle. Announcing the decree for the ruler, Tlacaelel advised the nobles to think of the battlefield as a “marketplace” and warned them that no one would wear fine clothing unless he demonstrated prowess in war (Durán 1967: II, 236).

Implicit in this association between nobility and military prowess was an understanding that social position varied with the type of service that persons rendered to the ruler and the gods. Nobles were exempt from paying tribute because they were “hidalgos and warriors” (Zorita 1963: 111), that is, because they gave service in war. Commoners also went to war but fighting was not their primary occupation; rather, they were producers of goods and payers of tribute. Free commoners gave tribute to the ruler and also to their *calpulli* chief in order to compensate him for expenses incurred in preparations for *calpulli* festivals. Farmers paid tribute in labor and crops, artisans in their products, and merchants in trade goods. Tenant farmers and tenant artisans gave tribute in labor service and in kind (Zorita 1963: 110, 181, 183, 184).² Occasionally, of course, commoners displayed conspicuous valor in battle, thus obscuring the distinction between warrior-noble and tribute-paying commoner. In the event of such an anomaly, the heroic commoners were promoted to higher status and allowed to found noble lines.

The nobles were thought to be protectors of the commoners. They also provided for them, especially by administering and distributing productive resources. Although house sites and fields of free commoners belonged in principle to the *calpulli* as a whole, in practice lands were distributed to families by nobles. Evidence suggests that nobles had similar administrative control over production in the guild-like *calpultin* (Calnek 1976: 297). Nobles may have used their shares of external tribute to supply tenant artisans with raw materials; at least, this was the arrangement in the royal house, wherein attached artisans were supplied from tribute paid by subject communities. Whether free artisans in the *calpultin* also received tribute in this manner is uncertain; the arrangement within the agrarian *capultin* implies that they did, but the presence of raw materials in the marketplace indicates that they may have purchased some or all of their supplies (Carrasco 1978: 34–35; Sahagún 1956: II, 325).

² Alonso de Zorita (1963: 105, 109, 184) implies that the *calpulli* headmen were nobles, probably *teteuctin* (chiefs). Presumably, the chiefs supported the *pipiltin* (lesser nobles) with their royal wages and tribute from commoners. Gonzalo Fernández Oviedo y Valdez (1959: 249) says that artisans did not pay tribute in kind but gave service in labor for which they were not paid. Torquemada (1969: I, 624) reports testimony that the people of Tenochtitlan were not required to pay tribute; it was given, however, in an effort to avoid tribute payments and is therefore suspect. (For more detailed discussion of the Aztec economy, see Carrasco (1978) and other articles in the same volume.)

In any event, Aztec militarism was vital to the economic welfare of Tenochtitlan, including its commoners. Edward Calnek (1972: 112) estimates that the chinampa gardens attached to individual households in Tenochtitlan could have supplied no more than 15 percent of the food needed by the city, a calculation that implies a high degree of occupational specialization and substantial dependence on other communities for food and raw materials. Indeed, the traffic flow in and out of the city was tremendous. Each day local merchants plied the lakes, bringing canoes full of foodstuffs to the city's markets and carrying manufactured articles to other towns. Elite goods were traded in distant provinces for raw materials, and in nearer communities, probably for food. There was also a great influx of tribute in food in addition to tribute in raw materials and manufactured articles. In general, the debt of distant provinces was assessed in feathers, precious stones, gold, skins, dyes, and textiles—in short, easily transportable objects whose weight and bulk were small relative to their value; central provinces paid tribute in food and military equipment (Broda 1978a; Molins Fábrega 1956). In addition, some communities were required to support specific festivals in Tenochtitlan with tribute goods and slaves for sacrifice (Scholes and Adams 1957: 59–60). Militarism kept the trade routes open and ensured the supply of tribute.

Trading and warfare were in fact closely related activities. Traders often operated in armed caravans and, travelling alone or in small groups, acted as spies. Whenever possible, they drove hard bargains. Their clandestine activities and predatory behavior not infrequently provoked armed reprisals against them (Katz 1972: 213). These attacks in turn afforded the Aztecs pretexts for war and imperial expansion. When the decision to go to war was made, shields and blankets were sent to the enemy as a declaration of hostility. If the enemy was too weak to mount resistance, it met the invader on the road with gifts of gold ornaments, featherwork, and other precious goods. Towns that surrendered in this fashion paid modest tribute and gave assistance in war, whereas those that were conquered had to pay heavy tribute (Zorita 1963: 134–35).

GODS AND FESTIVALS

Festivals honoring patron deities of Aztec clans and communities were scheduled according to two calendars, the divinatory and the solar. The first consisted of twenty periods of thirteen days and was evidently used for determining the birthday festivals for the patron deities of all the *calpultin*. The second, the solar calendar, had eighteen periods of twenty days (plus five intercalary days) and was used to schedule major festivals for prominent deities, perhaps the gods of the highest-ranking *calpultin* (Ingham 1971). Solar festivals were variously dedicated to war gods or gods of rain and fertility. Some—the most instructive for our purposes—featured both types of

deity and dramatized the relations between them. Human sacrifices occurred in the greatest numbers during particular festivals of the solar year (Durán 1967: I, 271). Children and slaves were sacrificed in some festivals, but most of the victims were captured warriors (Torquemada 1969: II, 567).

Myth asserted that the sun was created and set in motion through acts of sacrifice. According to the version recorded by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún (1956: II, 261–62), the gods gathered in the darkness of Teotihuacan and pondered the problem of bringing light into the world. First Tecuciztécatl and then Nanahuatzin volunteered to become the sun. The former of these two gods was wealthy and the latter, poor and ugly. A fire was built for their immolation, but when the moment arrived Tecuciztécatl could not muster sufficient courage and Nanahuatzin went first, becoming the sun, while Tecuciztécatl became the moon. The sun and moon appeared in the east but did not move. As Quetzalcoatl, Xipe Totec, Xolotl, the tribesmen called Mimixcoa (Cloud Serpents), and four goddesses watched, they agreed that they too would have to sacrifice themselves before celestial activity could begin. Quetzalcoatl took charge of the sacrifices and all died willingly, except for Xolotl, who successively transformed himself into a double corn plant, a double maguey plant, and finally an *axolotl* (salamander), which hid in the water. Eventually, he too was killed, but still the sun did not move until Quetzalcoatl made a powerful wind.

These self-sacrificing gods belonged to a supernatural pantheon that was organized like the clans: some deities were more important, others less so; all of the gods were divided among the four quarters of the cosmos. The division of the gods and the relationships between them also alluded to the pattern of social stratification and to the implicit social significance of human sacrifice.

The most important gods were four brothers, the sons of an ancestral pair (Garibay 1965: 23–24). Each of the four presided over a world direction and apparently represented one of the four phases of the sun in its daily round (i.e., dawn, noon, sunset, and darkness). Xipe Totec was the god of the east, wore a human skin, and was a patron of craftsmen. He was a god of maize and was closely associated with rain. Huitzilopochtli, the patron god of the Mexica, was also the principal god of the south. A warrior, he burned towns and carried a fire-breathing dragon or serpent. He was a manifestation of Tonatiuh, the sun, and an ally and diurnal counterpart of the black Tezcatlipoca, the principal god of the north, a domain associated with Mictlan, the underworld of the dead. The west was the region of Quetzalcoatl (Plumed Serpent), the god of wind who swept the paths clear for the rain gods. He was the patron of artisans and the discoverer of maize. Xolotl was Quetzalcoatl's twin and alter ego. Tezcatlipoca (Smoking Mirror) was a sorcerer, a patron of warriors, and an enemy of Quetzalcoatl. Like his ally Huitzilopochtli, he was associated with fire; he turned himself into Mixcoatl, the god of the hunt, in order to

make fire (Garibay 1965: 33). Tezcatlipoca was thought to send drought and famine (Durán 1967: I, 47).

Opposite quarters of the cosmos were similar and adjacent ones, different. Quetzalcoatl and Xipe Totec were alike in important respects; Xipe's hymn, which appears below, even compares him to a *quetzalcoatl* (see also Selser 1963: I, 133, 135). On the orthogonal north-south axis there was a comparable affinity between Tezcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli (Hunt 1977: 240–42). It is apparent that the north and south were associated more with fire, the east and west with water. This same distribution of fire and water is evident in the picture of the Tlalocque of the four directions in the Codex Borgia: in the north and south the Tlalocque bring drought and lightning, and pests eat the maize; in the east and west they bring rain and water, and the maize plants are strong and healthy (Selser 1963).³ The underworld (north) was the abode of volcanic fire, and the upper world (south) that of the sun; meanwhile, rain, vegetation, and reproduction were associated with the earth's surface (east and west) and, particularly, with caves, barrancas, and other passageways between the worlds above and below. The distinction was relative, however, since rain could come from any direction and the sun was present in the east at sunrise and in the west at sunset. The center or midpoint on the *axis mundi* included both elements, as illustrated in Figure 1; for example, at the top of Tenochtitlan's central pyramid there were two oratories, one for Huitzilopochtli and the other for Tlaloc, the god of rain.

Fire symbolized war and consumption, whereas water represented agriculture and craft production. The juxtaposition of the two elements thus alluded to social hierarchy. The glyphic symbol for war, the activity that produced and reproduced domination, was *atl-tlachinolli* (water and fire). Conquest was represented by the burning of an enemy temple. In keeping with this scheme, the principal victims in the creation of the sun were gods of water and fertility and patrons of agriculture and craft production.⁴ In ritual and myth, the domination of water by fire was portrayed in two versions, each a transformation of the other (Figure 2).

³ Durán (1967: I, 223–24) also indicates that the regions comprising the east and west of the Aztec cosmos, in contrast to the north and south, were typified by an abundance of water.

⁴ Other redactions of the myth of the sun tend to support this analysis. In the *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas*, Quetzalcoatl sacrificed his own son to create the fifth sun and Tlaloc sacrificed his son to create the moon (Garibay 1965: 35). In the version in Mendieta (1971: 79), Citli was annoyed when it was learned that many gods would have to die for the sun and tried to shoot the sun but was killed by him with his own arrow. When the other gods realized that it was useless to resist, they agreed to sacrifice themselves. In this case it was Xolotl, not Quetzalcoatl, who took charge of the sacrificing; after sacrificing the others, he sacrificed himself. In the *Leyenda de los soles*, it is Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli (i.e., Quetzalcoatl or Xolotl) who tried to shoot the sun. Tlilacahuan and Huitzilopochtli were said to be present when the gods were killed but it is unclear whether they were sacrificers or victims (Código Chimalpopoca 1945: 122).

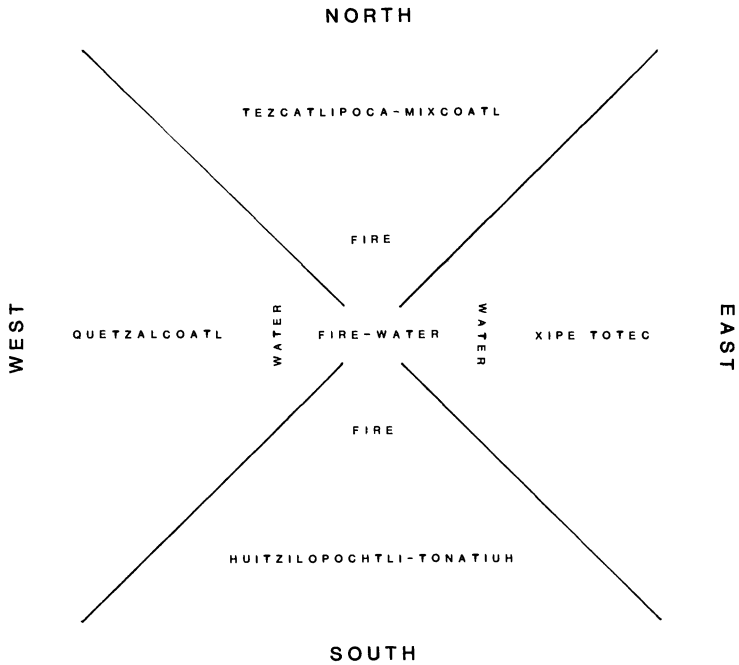


FIGURE 1. Gods, Elements, and World Directions

North and West

The Aztec month of Quecholli was dedicated to Mixcoatl, the god of the hunt, maker of fire, and guise of Tezcatlipoca. During this festival, a ritual hunt for deer and other animals was held, followed by the roasting of the game over a great bonfire (Durán 1967: I, 75–76). War captives and slaves were bound hand and foot and carried up the steps of the temple to the place of sacrifice “as one carries a deer.” In addition, reeds for arrows were collected, presented to Huitzilopochtli, and then redistributed among the warriors (Sahagún 1956: I, 127, 201–2).

The deer was apparently the animal companion spirit of Quetzalcoatl and Cihuacoatl, the principal god and goddess in the west. Deer-hunting incantations invoked Cihuacoatl, Chicome Xochitl, the Tlaloque, and the four winds (Alarcón 1953: 76–87). Cihuacoatl was known, among other things, as the Deer of Culhuacan (Sahagún 1956: I, 260). According to Jacinto de la Serna (1953: 294), Chicome Xochitl (Seven Flower), the deer god, was a manifestation of Piltzintecuhtli. A hymn situates Piltzintecuhtli with Xochiquetzal in Tamoanchan, a mythic realm of mist and rain in the west, and refers to Piltzintecuhtli as the priest of the god of wind, that is, Quetzalcoatl (Sahagún 1956: I, 259).

In one mythical account, a *nahual* or animal companion accompanies Quetzalcoatl on a quest for bones of the dead in the underworld (Códice Chimalpopoca 1945: 120–21). In another, Xolotl alone journeys to the underworld (Mendieta 1971: 77–78). It seems reasonable, therefore, to infer that Xolotl was Quetzalcoatl's *nahual*. Both Xolotl and Quetzalcoatl were associated with Venus, the former with its appearance in the west and the latter with its appearance in the east (Códice Chimalpopoca 1945: 11; Caso 1958: 24). Xolotl was identified with the *xoloitzcuintli*, or hairless dog, which was consumed by human beings and, in Tlaxcala at least, was offered to the rain gods to end drought (Moreno 1969). He was also identified, as we have seen, with the *axolotl*, or salamander. Donald Cordry (1980: 201) observes that contemporary dog masks in Puebla have caiman ears, and infers that the pre-Hispanic Xolotl was linked with the caiman or earth monster through the similarity between the salamander and the caiman. The crocodile was occasionally represented in Maya art with deer antlers on its head,⁵ and Quetzalcoatl's face sometimes had a crocodile-like snout and proportions. What is more, present-day Quetzalcoatl-like masks have similar snouts and are mounted with deer antlers or bull horns (Cordry 1980: 54, 125, 194).⁶ Evi-

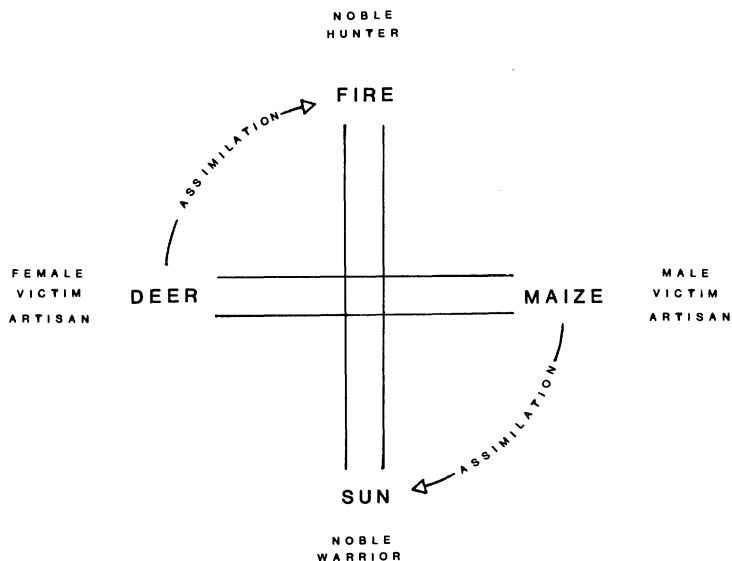


FIGURE 2. Sacrifice and Production

⁵ Mary Pohl, personal communication, February 1983.

⁶ Pohl (1981) shows that Maya deer sacrifice merged with the Hispanic bullfight after the conquest. The ancient Quiche Maya used a deerskin to portray Tohil, a version of Quetzalcoatl (Edmonson 1971: 183, 187).

dently, the animal disguises or companions of Quetzalcoatl included all three species—the dog, deer, and crocodile.⁷

South and East

A relationship analogous to that of the hunter and deer obtained between the sun and maize, that is, between Huitzilopochtli and Xipe Totec. Xipe's hymn associates him with water and likens him to a maize plant:

Thou, Night-Drinker,
 Why does thou mask thyself?
 Put on thy disguise, thy golden cape!
 My God, thy jade water descended;
 Precious cypress!
 Feathered turquoise/fire serpent!
 Maybe I shall die,
 I the tender maize plant;
 My heart is jade,
 But I shall see gold there.
 I shall rejoice if I ripen early.
 The war-chief is born!
 My God, let there be an abundance of maize plants,
 In a few places at least.
 Thy worshipper turns toward your mountains, toward you.
 I shall rejoice if it ripen early.
 The war-chief is born!⁸

⁷ Sahagún (1956: III, 266–74) mentions several types of mythical snake that may be relevant to this discussion. One was an *acoatl* (water snake), a large creature that inhabited caves and springs. With powerful inhalations, it drew animals and persons into the water, drowning them. The *mazacoatl* (deer snake) had deer antlers on its head and, like the *acoatl*, was large and dark, lived in caves, and captured victims with its breath. The meat of a smaller *mazacoatl* allowed a man to have multiple ejaculations in quick succession but when taken in excess, it caused a permanent erection and even death. Another snake was called the *ehcacacoatl* (wind snake). A *quetzalcoatl* (feathered snake) was about the same size as the water snakes. All of these snakes may have been closely associated with the god Quetzalcoatl. An informant of mine in northern Morelos (a weather-working shaman) described an *acoatl*, or Culebra de Agua (Water Snake), and a Torito (Little Bull). They reside, he said, in Alcaeca, a cave on the side of the volcano Popocatepetl; both, he added, are responsible for violent weather: the Water Snake causes water spouts and the Torito is connected with strong winds, downpours, and hurricanes. At one point, the informant indicated that the Torito and Culebra de Agua are manifestations of the same spirit. Among the weather-workers of Amecameca, the Torito controls the spirits of hail (Bonfil Batalla 1968: 112). A *culebrita* in the same area is called *ehecatl* (wind), a name that links him with Quetzalcoatl (Cook de Leonard 1966: 298). In the Nahuatl community of Tecospa, a *yeyecacoatl* (wind snake), also called the Culebra de Agua, is the leader of rain spirits, a function performed by San Miguel Arcángel in northern Morelos (Madsen 1960: 131). Among the Totonac, a *mazacuate* (deer snake) is associated with wind; it lives in water and is apparently identified with the Water Snake (Ichon 1973: 139–40). Beliefs in horned snakes occur in various parts of Mexico; typically, they are said to live in caves and springs and cause floods (Toors 1947: 507–9).

⁸ There are several translations of this hymn in the literature (see Barlow 1963; Garibay 1958; Sahagún 1950–69: Bk. 2, 213). My translation, following advice from Alfredo López Austin, seeks a more literal rendering.

Descriptions of the festival of Tlacaxipehualiztli also imply Xipe's connection with the maize plant and the young warrior, although they make clear that he epitomized the warrior as victim. This festival actually honored Huitzilopochtli as well as Xipe Totec and dramatized the subordination of the latter to the former (Sahagún 1956: I, 142–43). In preparation for the festival, a captive was dressed to represent Xipe, while in each *calpulli* one was dressed like its *calpultéotl*. The hearts of these captives were ripped out at dawn before the temple of Huitzilopochtli and offered to the sun. Next, commoners came forward and presented ears of dried maize. Nobles then donned the victims' skins along with the costumes of the gods worn by the victims. Each of these god impersonators was then tied, like a captor, to a series of captives. Fray Diego Durán (1967: I, 97) states that the tying of captor to prisoners symbolized their unity, and indeed Sahagún (1950–69: Bk. 2, 52–53) says that they were like father and sons to one another. Following this demonstration of unity, individual captives were tied one at a time to a sacrificial platform. Armed only with wooden swords and balls, they were obliged to defend themselves against well-armed men who were dressed as jaguars and eagles, that is, as soldiers of the sun. As each captive was dispatched, his heart was removed and offered to the sun (Durán 1967: I, 96–99).

The significance of the flayed skins is suggested by the festival of Ochpaniztli. The impersonator of Toci, Mother of the Gods, wore a human skin, as did each of the four priests representing the Cinteteo, or maize gods of the four directions (Sahagún 1956: I, 195). In other words, human skins may have symbolized the mantle of the maize plant, the covering that turns gold with maturity. The voice in Xipe's hymn, then, spoke to Xipe on behalf of the *calpulli* gods and young captives who, in the context of the festival, were identified, like Xipe himself, with the maize plant.

Domination and Ambiguity

I have followed Eduard Seler (1963: I, 190–98) in placing Mixcoatl in the north, although it should be noted that Mixcoatl also had associations with the south and east and, perhaps, the west. On the one hand, Sahagún (1956: I, 43) says that Camaxtli—another name for Mixcoatl—was similar to Huitzilopochtli, and Michel Graulich (1974) demonstrates that Mexica legends about Huitzilopochtli were modeled after legends about Mixcoatl. On the other hand, Camaxtli was the same god as the red Tezcatlipoca, that is, Xipe Totec (Garibay 1965: 23). Seler (1963: I, 190) has shown that human sacrificial victims, who are typically depicted in the codices wearing the red and white body stripes particular to Mixcoatl, were strongly associated with the east. Moreover, Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli, god of the morning star and soul of the self-immolated Quetzalcoatl, wore comparable stripes.

The similarity between Mixcoatl and Huitzilopochtli poses no serious difficulties for our analysis because it is consistent with the parallel between the

gods of the north and south. Mixcoatl's association with the east-west axis, although seemingly contradictory, is understandable in view of the fact that soldiers could be both hunters and victims of hunters. Depending on the outcome, those who shot arrows in battle could be either victors or vanquished: from one moment to another, the human counterparts of Mixcoatl were either hunter-killers (like Tezcatlipoca or Huitzilopochtli) or victims (like Quetzalcoatl or Xipe Totec). Residence in a powerful community was no assurance that one would always be on the side of the victors. As the festival of Tlacaxipehualiztli clearly implied, all the clan gods were potential victims.

Women also had a place in this cosmological scheme. The goddess Cihuacoatl represented a western female counterpart of the victimized Xipe, warrior in the east. Called the Warrior as well as the Deer of Culhuacan, indicating her role as both hunter and victim, she was closely affiliated with the Cihuateteo, women who died in childbirth. Women who successfully delivered children were said to be like soldiers who captured enemies in war, whereas women who died in delivery were like soldiers who died in battle (Sahagún 1950–69: Bk. 6, 93, 167, 180).

The ambiguity in the figures of Mixcoatl, Quetzalcoatl, and Cihuacoatl embodied in their dual natures as aggressors and victims was expressed in myths in which Mixcoatl first belonged to the victors and then to the vanquished. At one moment he controlled the deer; at another, control passed to his enemies. Finally, after dying at the hands of his enemies, he was reincarnated as a deer. The mythic cycle culminated in tales about the victimization of his son Quetzalcoatl by Tezcatlipoca.

According to the *Leyenda de los soles*, the goddess Iztacchalchiuhtlicue conceived the Mimixcoa and then five individuals, including Mixcoatl (Códice Chimalpopoca 1945: 122). The sun gave the Mimixcoa arrows and shields that they might supply him with hearts, but when they passed their time hunting and getting drunk, the sun instructed the five individuals to kill the Mimixcoa. In the version given in the manuscript known as *Los mexicanos por sus pinturas*, three Mimixcoa—Xiuhnel, Mimich, and Camaxtli (Mixcoatl)—escaped: Camaxtli turned himself into one of the enemies he had just defeated (Garibay 1965: 37). Following their escape, Xiuhnel and his younger brother Mimich chased a couple of two-headed deer. During the chase the deer assumed the form of human females and tempted the men with food and drink. Xiuhnel succumbed; he drank blood, slept with the “woman” (Itzpapalotl, another name for Cihuacoatl), and “ate her.”⁹ The other “woman” chased Mimich, but he eventually managed to shoot her with arrows. Then the woman who slept with Xiuhnel reappeared. Mimich and the gods of fire burned her and she exploded into variously colored rocks. There-

⁹ The Nahuatl text is ambiguous; it can also be construed to mean that Xiuhnel was eaten. In either event, Alfred López Austin's reading of the probable meaning is that they engaged in sexual intercourse.

upon Mixcoatl took the white rock—the remains of the deer—and treated it as a god.

This white rock or deer god gave Mixcoatl luck in war. Unfortunately, he lost the rock and the luck it brought after having illicit sexual relations with a relative of Tezcatlipoca. This union produced Quetzalcoatl, who grew up to fight his father's battles and to rule over Tula, a great city of skilled artisans. But the tide had turned. Mixcoatl was killed, and Quetzalcoatl was tricked into drunkenness and incest by the sorcerers Tezcatlipoca, Huitzilopochtli, and Tlacauepan. Defeated and humiliated, Quetzalcoatl left Tula and eventually committed suicide by jumping into a fire (Código Chimalpopoca 1945: 9–11; Sahagún 1956: I, 279–89). In another version, Tezcatlipoca, while playing ball with Quetzalcoatl, turned himself into a jaguar, defeated Quetzalcoatl and drove him from Tula (Mendieta 1971: 82). In a rendition told to Tarascan leaders by Nahuatl interpreters, Cupanzieri (i.e., Mixcoatl) lost a ball game and was sacrificed by his opponent. Siratatapeci, Cupanzieri's posthumous son (i.e., Quetzalcoatl), grew up in another town, where he spent his youth hunting. One day an iguana told him about the fate of his father. He exhumed his father's skeleton but dropped it in order to shoot a quail; the skeleton turned into a deer (Relación de Michoacán 1956: 241).

The mythical defeat of Quetzalcoatl by Tezcatlipoca was paralleled in the actual subjection of artisans to warrior-nobles in Tenochtitlan. Quetzalcoatl and various other fertility gods were patrons of the artisans. The Mexica believed that the crafts had been invented and perfected under the guidance of Quetzalcoatl (Sahagún 1956: I, 278; III, 186–87). Xipe Totec was the patron of gold and silver workers and Cihuacoatl of lapidaries, Xochiquetzal was the goddess of weavers, and Chicome Xochitl was the god of painters (Serna 1953: 174). Nappatecutli, one of the Tlaloque, was the patron of *petate* makers (Sahagún 1956: I, 70).

The correlation between artisan deities and the east-west axis was not perfect. Coyotlinahual, the patron of feather workers, was said to have assisted Tezcatlipoca in his machinations against Quetzalcoatl (Código Chimalpopoca 1945: 8–10). Chantico, a goddess of stonecutters and jewelers, may have been another exception to the association between artisan gods and fertility, because she is commonly thought to have been a goddess of fire. Chantico, however, was the same goddess as Cihuacoatl, Itzpapalotl, and Coyolxauhqui (Graulich 1974: 341–43). In her guise as Coyolxauhqui, she was the sister of Huitzilopochtli. According to Sahagún (1956: I, 271–73), the Centzonhuitznahua and their sister Coyolxauhqui resolved to kill their mother when she became pregnant with Huitzilopochtli. As they approached her, the infant sprang from her womb, took a fire-serpent from the hearth, and cut Coyolxauhqui to pieces.

In view of Itzpapalotl's immolation and the fate of Coyolxauhqui, it may be more precise to say that Chantico was a goddess *in fire*, that is, the sacrificial

victim of fire. This interpretation is confirmed by the festival of Huey Tecuilhuitl, where in Chantico appeared as Cihuacoatl. The role of the goddess was taken by a young woman, who was called Xilonen, the name of the goddess of tender maize. The young woman was made to sit before a brazier that represented Xiuhtecuhtli, the god of fire, while four male captives were half-roasted and then killed. The young woman was then placed upon their bodies and sacrificed and her blood was sprinkled over the fire.

This rite, along with others in the festival, commemorated the victory of Tezcatlipoca over Quetzalcoatl. The festival included a re-enactment of the events in Tula and a sacrifice in honor of Quetzalcoatl before the temple of Tezcatlipoca. The name of the festival, "Huey Tecuilhuitl," the Great Feast of the Lords, recognizes that descendants of Tezcatlipoca and his allies had remained in power ever since the fall of Quetzalcoatl (Dürán 1967: I, 125–41, 265–67).

HEARTS, BLOOD, AND TRIBUTE

In the Aztec scheme, the movement of the sun, which began with the sacrifices of gods, was sustained through warfare and human sacrifice. The sun personified the Mexica community, and the demands it made on human beings reflected the actual importance to the community's welfare of waging war and collecting tribute. According to one mythical account, a group of Mimixcoa appeared amid the Aztecs, and Huitzilopochtli declared that they would be the first to "pay tribute with their lives." Later he added that his people would be known as Mexica, and he gave them weapons so that they might continue to serve him in war (Tezozomoc 1949: 22–23).

In effect, one could serve the sun and the Aztec state by three means: waging war, paying tribute, or giving one's life. The last act was symbolically equivalent to the first two. The souls of sacrificed warriors served the sun as immortal warriors in the afterlife. Hearts and blood were precious objects, comparable in this respect to the precious goods given in tribute. Blood was *chalchih-atl* (precious water), and hearts were likened to "fine burnished turquoise" (Sahagún 1950–69: Bk. 6, 114–15). Representations of the gods also demonstrated the conflation of blood and tribute items. According to Hernán Cortés (1971: 107), many images were "made of dough from all the seeds and vegetables which [people] eat, ground and mixed together, and bound with the blood of human hearts, which those priests tear out while still beating." Moreover, gods and their images were identified and adorned with precious feathers, stones, bracelets, and the like—that is, with the most valuable forms of tribute (Sahagún 1950–69: Bk. 2, 207, 211, 213; Bk. 7, 1).

An affinity between hearts and blood, on the one hand, and tribute or wealth, on the other, is further implied by beliefs about the *tonalli*, or animating spirit. The *tonalli* (from *tona*, to make heat or sun) was consubstantial with Tonatiuh (Sun), the ultimate source of heat, and indeed instantiated

within a person something of the power of the sun. The wealth of a person or god was intimately linked to the strength of his or her *tonalli*. The exclusive right of nobles to possess luxury goods was called *intónal in pipiltin*, and the wealth of a god was referred to as *teuxíhuil* (from the words *god* and *turquoise*), implying that the precious stone was equivalent to the god's *tonalli*. Moreover, the *tonalli* was associated with the *tléyotl* (from *tletl*, fire), a person's fame (López Austin 1980: 231, 236, 238).

Ordinarily the parts of the *tonalli* were distributed throughout the bloodstream, although in moments of fright they were thought to retreat toward the heart or leave the body through the fontanelle.¹⁰ Death also disengaged the *tonalli* from the body. In the usual funerary ritual, the body was cremated. The fire released some of the *tonalli*, thus allowing some of it to accompany the *teyolía* (soul) to the afterlife; the rest remained in the ashes, hair clippings, and bones and so gave strength to the deceased's family and *calpulli* (López Austin 1980: 367–68, 371). Presumably, it was understood that in human sacrifice the victim's fear released part of his or her *tonalli* and concentrated the remainder in the heart. Similarly, lesser acts of penitence assumed the presence of vital heat in the blood; the maguey spines used to draw blood in penitential self-mutilation were likened to "fire drills" (Sahagún 1950–69: Bk. 7, 11). The sun was the source of vital heat, but his ability to sustain life depended on his receiving heat from human beings, just as the services provided by the military elite presupposed the production of a material surplus by the commoners.¹¹ The identification of warrior-nobles with the sun and other gods was in fact explicit and explains why the nobles, like the gods, assimilated the power of other human beings in the form of flesh and blood.

This seems at least to be the logic of oblations to the sun and other gods of war and fire; but what are we to make of the various festivals in which slaves, captives, and Aztec children were sacrificed to gods of rain and fertility?

To begin with, it should be noted that the rain and fertility gods were also animated with *tonalli*. Moreover, they were warriors and thus associated with the fire of war and, ultimately, the sun. Indeed, Quetzalcoatl, Tlaloc, and Chalchiuhtlicue, goddess of water, had each taken their turns as the sun in previous ages. The Tlaloque used lightning as a weapon and representations of Quetzalcoatl and Xipe Totec show them as armed with hatchets or spears. The gods of rain and fertility thus received strength from human flesh and blood no less than the gods of war and fire. In addition, they were clan patrons and hence closely affiliated with the nobles or warriors despite their special relations with farmers and artisans.

¹⁰ This is a reconstruction based on contemporary Nahuatl ethnography. Present-day beliefs suggest that the *tonalli* was thought to have twelve or thirteen parts.

¹¹ The sacrifice of fertility-god impersonators, of course, might also have been seen as promoting rain or the fertility of plants.

At the same time, blood and hearts had associations with water, the element most congruent with the nature of the rain and fertility gods. Blood, as we have seen, was "precious water." During *Atlcahualo*, the first period of the solar year, children were sacrificed to the gods of rain and water. They were actually encouraged to cry, for it was thought that their tears would bring rain. Presumably, the same practice obtained during the three following periods and again in the time of *Atemoztli*, when children were again sacrificed to the rain deities.¹²

Nonetheless, the ultimate superiority of *Huitzilopochtli-Tonatiuh*, or war and fire, was never in doubt, even in festivals that were dedicated exclusively to the gods of rain and fertility. In the *Atlcahualo* festival there was a gladiatorial combat in which victims were first wounded by other captives and then sacrificed in the usual way. Although these deaths honored the gods of water, their hearts were offered to the sun as well (Sahagún 1956: I, 141). During the festival of *Etzalqualiztli*, slaves and captives were dressed in imitation of the *Tlaloque* and their hearts were ripped out and thrown into the lake; the text does not say whether they were first offered to the sun, but such an offering seems likely. During the festival of *Tecuilhuitontli*, although captives were slain before the temple of *Tlaloc*, it was the sun to whom their hearts were actually offered (Sahagún 1956: I, 174). When children were sacrificed to the rain gods, they too were killed by having their hearts ripped out, and again the implication may have been that the sun was a recipient—perhaps the principal recipient—of the offerings. In the fourth month of the solar calendar—the last of four successive months of child sacrifice to the rain gods—little children were taken to the temple of *Huitzilopochtli* for blood-letting (Durán 1967: I, 252).

Sacrifice and ritual cannibalism, then, symbolized the economic and political assimilation of conquered peoples and the superiority of nobles and dominant communities. In lieu of accepting actual tribute, the gods and nobles consumed human flesh and blood. Those who were higher in the social hierarchy appropriated the labor and products or the very lives of those who were lower. It now becomes apparent why the commoners were told on the eve of the revolt against *Azcapotzalco* that they could eat their nobles on dirty and broken plates should the revolt fail: such unceremonious cannibalism—a radical inversion of social order—would have been a symbolically appropriate punishment for nobles who utterly failed in their roles as warriors and leaders.

¹² The children were purchased from their mothers, and at least one source says that they came from noble families (Sahagún 1956: I, 114, 139; Motolinía 1971: 66). This implies that child sacrifice may have been an inversion of adult sacrifice: in offerings to the sun and other gods of war and fire, sacrificing of the victims (adults) was associated primarily with water, whereas in child sacrifice, the "water" (i.e., tears and blood) was taken from children who were associated by virtue of their social station with the dominant element, fire.

MOTIVATION

Sacrificial ritual implied that warfare and sacrifice were forms of production analogous to hunting, agriculture, and craft production or, more precisely, that victory in war and the expropriation of tribute were analogous to the consumption of the products of material production. In fact, of course, warfare produced wealth; as Tlacaelel said, the battlefield was like a marketplace. In a deeper sense, however, the object of production was society itself; the aim in collecting tribute, both within and between communities, was not only to obtain material goods but to produce and reproduce social domination.

Inasmuch as sacrifice was a symbolic representation of hierarchical relations and tribute obligations, death as a sacrificial offering was a fitting punishment for insubordination and the refusal to pay tribute. By one mythical account—evidently a version of the struggle between Huitzilopochtli and Coyolxauhqui—the practice originated in an act of retribution. It was said that during their wanderings before the founding of Tenochtitlan the Mexica stayed for a while in Tula. Various dissidents became enamored of the city and wanted to remain there even though Huitzilopochtli was insisting that the peregrination continue. The god became furious. The next morning the leaders of the rebellion were found strewn about with their hearts ripped out (Durán 1967: II, 33–34). The myth mirrored social practice: sacrificial victims included disobedient slaves and certain types of criminals and, of course, the captured warriors of towns and provinces that had refused to pay tribute.

Slave sacrifice directly reinforced productivity and subservience among commoners within a community. In some instances people sold themselves or their children into slavery to cover debts. Often such persons were either chronic gamblers or loose women with expensive tastes. In other instances commoners who had failed to meet their tribute obligations were sold into slavery in the marketplace by their nobles (Oviedo y Valdez 1959: 249–50). Consistently disobedient slaves were collared and became eligible for sacrifice if they remained incorrigible (Torquemada 1969: II: 563–67).

Meanwhile, the ritual slaying of captured warriors encouraged subservience to Aztec hegemony in the countryside. Huitzilopochtli, the patron deity of the Mexica, could not have been better suited to inspire acquiescence in actual and potential subjects. He was revered as a warrior of awesome bellicosity, a destroyer of towns and killer of peoples (Sahagún 1956: I, 43). The scale and methods by which humans were sacrificed to him were especially terrifying to the people of the hinterland, an effect ensured by the custom of inviting their representatives to observe the spectacles (Tezozomoc 1943: 121–43). According to Durán (1967: II, 175), guests who witnessed the sacrifices after the Aztec victory over the Huastecs were horrified and so completely intimidated that their cities and provinces no longer rebelled or

disputed the will of the Mexica. Sacrifices following the war with the Matlatzinca affected representatives of various unconquered provinces in a similar manner. Sahagún (1950–69: Bk. 2, 53) reports that they were confounded, undone, and disunited. Likewise, Durán (1967: II, 278–79) states that “the lords and principals who were called to the feast and sacrifice were horrified, beside themselves, on seeing the killing and sacrificing of so many men, so terrified that they dared not speak.” The king dressed his guests in fine mantles and gave them pieces of jewelry. For their part, the visitors brought the king gifts of fine blankets, cacao, precious feathers, conch shells, and other products. The exchange of presents anticipated the economic and political relations to follow: the provinces would send food and raw material to Tenochtitlan and the provincial nobles would be rewarded for their fealty with the insignia of Aztec nobility. The initiation of this relationship in the context of human sacrifice underscored the alternative: the hinterland would be assimilated in one way or another (see also Broda 1978b: 247–51).

The elaboration of ritual intimidation in ancient Mexico was likely a corollary of the exploitative nature of hierarchical relations within and between communities. Tribute demands placed on commoners and subordinate communities were often extremely burdensome. One source states that tribute collectors took one third of a farmer’s production (Torquemada 1969: I, 321), and another, that they took everything except what was essential for survival (Oviedo y Valdez 1959: 249). An Otomí native voiced what may have been a common sentiment:

Moctezuma and the Mexicans have oppressed us much, they have overwhelmed us. We are up to our noses in the anguish and affliction they have given us. He demands everything from us in tribute. . . . [T]he Mexican is an inhuman being. He is very perverse. . . . The Mexicans are extremely bad. There is nobody who can surpass the Mexican in evil (Sahagún 1956: IV, 130).

Records of various reconquests in the *Códice Mendocino* (1938) further testify to the widespread resentment directed toward the Aztecs and their tribute demands. As many as 10 percent of the Aztec conquests after Acamapichtli may have been reconquests of previously defeated communities.

Exploitation and accompanying resentment probably increased in direct proportion to the demographic growth of dominant communities. As population grew, so did the requirements for food and raw materials. These requirements were met by extending trade routes and adding more contributing communities to the empire, although this was not accomplished without raising the cost of transporting goods and tribute to the center. Costs mounted rapidly with distance travelled and weight carried because, apart from the central valley, goods travelled only on human backs (see Litvak King 1971). Thus, as the orbit of contributing communities expanded, so too did the level of exploitation that was necessary maintain the return on military and admin-

istrative effort. Even assessments against existing tribute payers were progressively increased (Berdan 1978: 186–87; Gibson 1971: 388).

The inefficiency of transportation also interfered with the movement of armed forces and thus posed difficulties for the policing of tribute collection in the hinterland. The difficulties must have multiplied as the empire expanded and resentment grew. Military terrorism was one solution to these problems because it magnified fear of retribution.¹³ Durán (1967: II, 168–69) notes that the Aztec army was extremely abusive to local populations, even when it was received with hospitality. Human sacrifice was probably an even more effective form of persuasion. Demonstrations of the terrible consequences of resistance and rebellion in centrally located spectacles underscored the power of the military and thus minimized the need to move the army from one place to another. Moreover, sacrifice dramatically asserted the Mexica's privileged relation to the sun and the cosmic inevitability of their military and economic expansion.

The Aztecs were certainly aware of ethical objections to human sacrifice. It was said that Quetzalcoatl had opposed human sacrifice despite the efforts of Tezcatlipoca and his allies to persuade him otherwise; because of love for his people, Quetzalcoatl allowed only the sacrifice of snakes, birds, and butterflies. Yet, if myth admitted objection to human sacrifice, it argued even more forcefully in favor of the practice by making it the wish of the reigning gods of the cosmos: the three sorcerers had driven Quetzalcoatl from Tula precisely because he was against human sacrifice (Código Chimalpopoca 1945: 8–9). Moreover, it portrayed persons who refused to wage war and offer hearts to the sun as morally suspect, for example, given to incest and drunkenness. Myth further implied that it was an honor to serve the sun as warrior or sacrificial victim. This message, of course, was aimed not only at actual or potential subordinate communities in the hinterland but also at Aztec warriors who might have to die in battle or as sacrificial victims.

In addition, myth strengthened the case for human sacrifice by intimating that the prevailing political economy could not exist without it. The Toltecs of Tula were pictured in myth as skilled artisans who enjoyed material abundance; the squash and ears of maize they grew were huge and heavy, and the blades of amaranth were like palm leaves (Sahagún 1956: I, 278–79). This image described Tula as not unlike Tenochtitlan. It represented the complex division of labor and prodigious material requirements of an imperial city. Yet, it was a partial inversion of real conditions, one that implied the necessity of warfare and human sacrifice. Tenochtitlan included many talented artisans among its numbers, but the task of provisioning the city was anything but easy. In orations to their children, the Mexica warned the youth to brace

¹³See Barry L. Isaac (1983) for discussion of this point.

themselves against thirst, hunger, and hardship (Sahagún 1956: II, 126, 136), and, in fact, the Mexica were precariously dependent upon a hostile hinterland for food and raw materials. The Toltecs, blessed with what seemed to be miraculous wealth, could afford to sacrifice only animals and insects, but for the Mexica abundance depended on a favored relation with a god who demanded war and the more powerful oblation of human hearts and blood.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Mexica myth formulated an understanding of the conditions of existence: the community and the cosmos itself depended upon the assimilation of the weak by the strong. Gods and nobles alike consumed the labor, production, and even the bodies of the common people. Sacrifice to the gods was a metaphor for tribute to the state, and the anthropophagic meal symbolized the ties between gods and nobles, the elite core of the community. The sacrifice of slaves and war captives ensured the social production and reproduction of internal and external relations of domination.

In these respects, Aztec society and culture were not altogether unique. Classic anthropological monographs on sacrifice show that tribute to and communion with the gods and the ritual slaying of a person or animal associated with the corn spirit are recurrent themes in the religions of early civilizations. Ethnographic examples might even be adduced to suggest that human sacrifice and cannibalism were practiced in chiefdoms and early states with some regularity. Nonetheless, the scale of Aztec sacrifice was certainly unusual. I have suggested that a combination of urban growth and diminishing economic returns to imperial expansion was a primary impetus for this phenomenon. The merit of this hypothesis remains uncertain but may become less so as we learn more about the dynamic processes in the rise and fall of imperial polities in ancient Mexico.

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