
Nourishing Gods: Birth and Personhood in Highland Mexican Codices

Markus Eberl

Humans define themselves through personhood as agents in society. To become persons, children differentiate their self from others. They take, as George Mead (1934) says, the other and self-objectify by predicating a sign-image or trope upon themselves. Birth rituals realize these tropes with the child's body as tool and raw material. Birth almanacs in Highland Mexican codices depict, as I argue, the transformation of a child into a person. Patron gods pierce the child, display it, manipulate its umbilical cord and nurse it. Gods provide the child with vital life forces while the child and future adult nourishes the gods through sacrifice. The birth almanacs situate Aztec personhood in a covenant of humans with gods. As children mature, bodily changes metonymically express the metaphoric relationship of the children with their patron gods. In the bathing ceremony, fellow humans — especially the child's parents and the midwife — step into the roles of the patron gods and perform the above activities on the child. Aztec children other themselves in gods through ritual practices. By connecting the ideology and practice of personhood, the birth almanacs are a theory of social action.

Tlapitzalli tlamamalli tlapetlaualli ('Blown, drilled, polished'), begins the proverb in Andrés de Olmos's Nahuatl grammar from 1547. It continues, *in opitzaloc in omamalihuac in opetlualoc* ('What was blown, what was drilled, what was polished'), before revealing: *In otlachialtiloc iuhqui inteocuitla cozcatl* ('What was awaited: it was the divine jewel') — a newborn child in the eyes and words of the Aztecs (my translation after Maxwell & Hanson 1992, 83, 172).¹ This proverb compares the birth of a child to the transformation of a rock into a gem.

For the Aztecs, biological birth creates a body devoid of essential human characteristics. I argue that the birth almanacs in Highland Mexican codices depict the gradual process through which a child becomes a person (Fig. 1). Social birth requires 'shaping and polishing'. The birth almanacs show how gods pierce a child, how they display it, how they manipulate its umbilical cord and how they nurse it. Patron gods transform a child into a socially and morally responsible human being. Aztec personhood rests on the intimate relationship between humans and gods.

Defining personhood

A person has free will, meaning that a person can act even against external constraints. 'If we choose to remain at rest, we may,' says philosopher David Hume (1894 [1777], 95). 'If we choose to move, we also may.' A person is aware of the surroundings and acts accordingly. Further, a person reacts by considering personal behaviour and the behaviour of others. Reflective self-evaluation enables a person to claim rights and fulfil obligations in society. Acting and being acted upon links a person to others; practices constitute social relations and, in turn, form the actors who engage in them. For example, in Gawan gift-giving the host provides food to his overseas visitor and hopes to receive a comparable gift from him in the future (Munn 1986). The exchange requires mutual but often tacit consent about the two dimensions of personhood: rights and duties, which imply the status of participants, and the social other to which they apply (Fortes 1973, 287; Goodenough 1965, 3, 7; Linton 1936, 113). Here, observable behaviours rather than