AZTECS MYTHS AND CONSCIOUSNESS

The Aztecs were first known as Mexica. Like many other nomad Nahua populations they came to the high plateau of the Anahuac of present day Mexico City from the north. They were the fruit of the continuing immigration that flowed to North America through the Bering Strait, and that we have qualified as post-Atlantean. They arrived at Tula in the year 1165 and later moved to Culhuacan where the ruler, Achitometl, allowed them to settle in the lands of Tizapan, provided they paid him tribute of canoes, labor, and mercenaries. Achitometl also gave them in marriage his daughter who could claim Toltec descent. For reasons that history ignores the Aztecs sacrificed the daughter and the Culhuacanos forced them to take refuge on the island of the lake Texcoco. There, Tenochtitlan was founded in 1325.

In Tenochtitlan the Aztecs were dominated by the Tepanecs, who similarly requested a tribute. A later ruler, Tezozomoc, doubled the amount of tribute. Already strained relations reached a breaking point when the Aztecs asked Maxtla, the son of Tezozomoc, permission to build a stone aqueduct. His refusal brought about an insurrection and the Aztecs, led by Izcoatl, defeated the Tepanecs in 1428. In order to do this they had allied with Texcoco and Tlacopan. In retaliation the Tepanecs now needed to pay a tribute of labor, land, and products to the Aztecs and their allies and they were not allowed to choose their own leader. The year 1428 is the turning point of Aztec rule.

The year 1428 is a pivotal date for Mesoamerican and indeed for American history. It marks the beginning of the Aztec Empire. We can now look closer at this single event of the formation of the Triple Alliance and its consequences. The momentous step of 1428 had probably been prepared for many years before. The ruler of the Alliance—the Tlaotani—was chosen by a council of warriors and priests, the so-called "Council of Four." What counted most were his military abilities and other religious criteria, not just heredity. Behind the figure of Izcoatl, the first ruler, stands tall the figure of Tlaclael, the highest priest.

Aztec society achieved a particular form of state in which religious, military, political, and economic functions were intimately connected with each other. The education of the priesthood and of the commoner was firmly held by the state. However, the keystone of the imperial social architecture laid a step above the simple concentration of all the functions of society

under the hands of the state. Many city-states had already attempted such preliminary steps but none had set in place the possibility of empire, apart from Chichen Itza.

What made the Aztec state unique were the sweeping reforms introduced in 1428. In that year, Izcoatl—under what many see as the instigation of Tlaclael—burned all the earlier codices, the religious and historical documents. The justification for this act is offered in the Aztec migration myth originally published in *General History of the Things of New Spain*, Book 10, with the following words: "The history of it [the book] was saved, but it was burned when Izcoatl ruled in Mexico. A council of rulers of Mexico took place. They said: 'It is not necessary for all the common people to know of the writings; government will be defamed, and this will only spread sorcery in the land; for it containeth many falsehoods.'"[(1)] According to the native Tezozomoc and the Spanish Duran, Tlaclael was the man on whom power rested, rather than on the emperor.[(2)] He outlived three successive rulers who were either brothers or cousins.

An earlier custom had already been adopted of rewriting history through what some authors call "creative mythography." We saw it at work in the dynasty of Palenque. The legitimization of political authority through Toltec blood was the simplest example of such mythography. It allowed the justification of an uninterrupted spiritual legacy through physical descent. The rewriting of history is also achieved in myths and legends. The Aztecs did this by emphasizing their continuity with Teotihuacan, which the Aztecs imagined built by the gods (City of the Gods is the meaning of the Aztec word Teotihuacan) or by a race of giants. The city legitimized their continuity with primeval times through the legend of the Fifth Sun, as we will see later.

Aztec society was very stratified. The top of the pyramid was occupied by the nobility, in large part composed of the best warriors, the priesthood, and the *pochteca*, the equivalent of state merchants conducting foreign trade. Of particular interest to the present context is the training of warriors. Beginning in their adolescent years they were instructed to take captives and not to kill their enemies. One of the earliest requirements put on the young fighter was not to assist a companion in difficulty. Having proven his valor, the warrior accumulated civil responsibilities and functions of a more cultural nature, like the administration of schools. He was also given privileges, such as tax exoneration and the right to keep concubines. The commoner who offered many captives for human sacrifice could climb the social ladder.

Aztec economy was heavily dependent upon the tribute levied on the subjugated populations. The tribute supported a growing section of administrative professions, bureaucrats, soldiers, nobles, and priests. In time Aztec society grew top-heavy, leading to an endless cycle of war and conquest. Here is how the war was characterized from Aztec sources in the dialogue between Tlaclael and Moctezuma I: "Our god will feed himself with them [prisoners] as though he were eating warm tortillas, soft and tasty, straight out of the oven….And this war should be of such a nature that we do not endeavor to destroy the others totally. War must always continue, so that each time and whenever we wish and our god wishes to eat and feast, we may go there as one who goes to the market to buy something to eat…organized to obtain victims to offer our god Huitzilopochtli…"[(3)] The need for sacrificial captives and tribute for the nobility created the urge for more and more war campaigns. This obliged the armies to move farther and farther from the capital. The expansion met with logistical limits, both in depressed areas that could not provide a sizeable tribute, and in regions too far removed from the capital. The overly centralized state had become an obstacle to the desired imperialistic expansion.

Human Sacrifice

War's main purpose was the capture of sacrificial victims. Human sacrifice had returned and intensified in Aztec culture. This does not contradict Steiner's assertion that the power of the decadent Mexican Mysteries had been broken as far as the fourth post-Atlantean age was concerned. We must remember that Steiner referred to a particular form of human sacrifice, the one involving organ removal from a live victim with the consequent knowledge wrought by the priest. The appropriation of this knowledge was achieved most likely by Chichen Itza's priesthood. The Aztecs came to power in 1428, a few years after the symbolic beginning date of the Fifth post-Atlantean Age of the Consciousness Soul that Steiner places in 1413. As in the political sphere, Tlaclael had introduced sweeping changes in the religious/spiritual sphere.

The Toltecs had reintroduced the practice of human sacrifice, even the new sacrifice by removal of the heart. The year 1428 is once again a watershed date. What had been a practice limited to the order of the hundreds reached the historic heights of an estimated fifteen thousand sacrificial victims per year under the Aztecs. The dedication of the Temple of Tenochtitlan alone apparently required the death of more than ten thousand victims in four days.[(4)] Most important of all was the generalization of human sacrifice through removal of the heart from a live victim. This

innovation also finds justification in the new mythology introduced by Tlaclael. A specific political structure existed on the basis of a particular worldview that supported it. We will now have a look at the imaginative contents of Aztec myth and legend and characterize them in relation to the Popol Vuh, with which Aztec tradition emphatically claims continuity.

Aztec Myth and the Rise of Huitzilopochtli

Huitzilopochtli is the man-become-god who accompanies the Aztecs in the mythical migration from Aztlan to Tenochtitlan. Let us now examine the myth of his virgin birth. The entire version is included in appendix 2.

The god is born on the hill of Coatepec, "Hill of Serpents." A woman by the name of Coatlicue is the mother of the Four Hundred Boys of the South, known as Centzon Huitznahuac, and of their sister Coyolxauhqui. While she is doing penance in Coatepec, a ball of fine feathers falls on Coatlicue, which she picks up and places on her bosom. Consequently she is impregnated by a divine being. The Boys of the South believe that she has been dishonored and decide to put her to death. One of the gods, whose name is Cuauhuitlicac, reveals the plot to Huitzilopochtli, who is already communicating with his mother in the womb. Soon after birth, Huitzilopochtli puts on armor and gear and fights his opponents. His first victim is Coyolxauhqui whose head he severs with a "serpent of fire." Her body falls down the hill and is dismembered. Soon after, Huitzilopochtli pursues the Centzon Huiznahuac and annihilates them. Only a few, who escape the massacre, find their way to the south. The initial ferocity of the Four Hundred Boys is no match for the man-god. This is what the text says about the killing of the Four Hundred Boys: "The great warrior did more than defeat them…he obliterated their destiny…he introduced them into his destiny, he made them his own insignia." Huitzilopochtli wants to blot out their whole being, not just their bodies.

We can recognize some of the elements of the Popol Vuh in Huitzilopochtli's myth, as well as some major differences. The maiden is no longer impregnated by the Tau-drop of water but by the feather, a shift towards the air element. The Aztec hero is born full-grown: he requires no development. It is interesting to compare Hunahpu's deed with that of Huitzilopochtli. The Mayan solar god does away with human sacrifice. Human sacrifice, aptly described by Coyolxauhqui's dismemberment, is Huitzilopochtli's first act of life. In fact, Huitzilopochtli is a functional replica of the giant Zipacna of the Popol Vuh in the corresponding episode with the Four Hundred Boys. The myth has two different elements from the Popol Vuh, re-arranged and meshed together. The birth is the same as the

Twins' birth; the deed is the same as is accomplished by Zipacna, the hero of the First Age, when he buries the Four Hundred Boys under their house.

The Aztec migration myth completes the justification for heart sacrifice. Ceremonial flaying and heart sacrifice appear in it as historical precedents. Heart sacrifice is first performed on Copil, a great sorcerer and son of the patron deity's sister, Malinalxoch. The text specifies: "They pursued each other with cunning and they captured Copil in Tepetzinco. When he was dead Huitzilopochtli cut off his head and slashed open his chest, he tore out his heart." Further in the text comes the flaying of the daughter of Achitometl, whom the Chichimec king of Culhuacan had previously given in marriage to the Mexica. The text sets the precedent for later ceremonies. It says, "Then Huitzilopochtli spoke...he said to them, 'O my fathers, I order you to slay the daughter of Achitometl and to flay her. When you have flayed her, you are to dress a priest in her skin.'"[(5)]

We will complete this review of mythological references with the myth of the creation of the sun and the moon. This is what the Aztecs call the "Birth of the Fifth Sun." Continuity with the tradition of the Popol Vuh is made manifest from the onset: "It is told that when yet all was in darkness, when yet no sun had shone and no dawn [Dawning] had broken—it is said—the gods gathered themselves together and took counsel among themselves there at Teotihuacan." The gods are awaiting the Dawning that will only come about if some of them will sacrifice themselves. Two of them—Tecuciztecatl and Nanauatzin—offer themselves by casting themselves into the fire. The eagle and the ocelot follow them. They do not die but are blackened by the flames. The two gods rise again in the heavens, Nanauatzin as the sun, Tecuciztecatl as the moon. This too is a familiar theme from the Popol Vuh, a parallel to the apotheosis of the Twins. Soon after, sun and moon stop on their path—at the time of the winter solstice—and all the gods decide to sacrifice themselves. It is the wind-god, Ecatl, who slays them and blows with strength in order to set the sun in motion.

The Fifth Sun is born in Teotihuacan. The Aztec myth therefore claims continuity with Toltec tradition. It is now clear that the Aztecs continued Toltec worldviews and pushed them to farther consequences. The Aztec Fifth Sun occurs immediately after the Fourth Sun of the Dawning. Nanauatzin is the Nahua version of the name Nanauac, given to Hunahpu by the Maya.[(6)] In this myth too, as in the myth of Huitzilopochtli and in the migration myth, there is an escalation of sacrifice until "all the gods died when the sun came into being."

Finally the mention of the ocelot and the eagle indicates the future

importance of the Jaguar and Eagle knights. The text shows it thus: "From this event, [plunging into the fire] it is said, they took—from here was taken—the custom whereby was called and named one who was valiant, a warrior. The word quauhtli came first, it is told, because, as was said, the eagle first entered the fire. And the ocelot followed thereafter: thus it is said in one word—quauhtlocelotl because the latter fell into the fire after the eagle."

Aztec mythology shows a link with the traditions of the Popol Vuh. The written record also helps to shed some light on the element of continuity and escalation between Toltec and Aztec practices. We will now look at the place of ritual in Aztec life with an eye to similarities and differences with the traditions of the Popol Vuh.

Aztec Gods and Ritual

Early Mayan ritual, as it derived from the Popol Vuh, instituted the two parts of the year: the time of the sacred calendar, and the time of the civil year, with the corresponding cults of the agrarian god and of the solar god. According to the Spanish monk, Sahagun, the Aztecs maintained this division of the year and of the priesthood. The agrarian cult was called *Telpochcalli*, the tribal cult *Calmenac*. In the Telpochcalli the priests worked, ate, and slept together. The pupils of the Calmenac went on the paths alone and slept alone.[(7)] This is confirmed by other sources. Tlaloc's rites were performed at night and the sacrifices occurred at midnight or before dawn. Huitzilopochtli ruled over the dry season, Tlaloc over the rainy season.[(8)] All of this faithfully reflects early Mayan tradition.

Aztec ritual modified old practices of the sacred calendar according to the new worldview. The odyssey of the maize received a new interpretation. What follows are examples of sacrifices and their relation to the cycle of maize and the deeds of the gods. The gestation of the young maize within the mother earth is performed in Aztec ritual with the flaying of a female victim whose skin envelops a young man. This represents the skin of the earth goddess Teteoinan or Toci enveloping Xipe, the young maize god. Girard sees a parallel of it in Mayan stelae where the young god is enveloped by a jaguar skin or emerges from the jaws of a jaguar. In another feast of Toci, called "Heart of Earth," earthly sexual intercourse was represented by impaled victims. The "Fiesta de los Elotes" (Festival of the New Maize) was celebrated by sacrificing a woman who represented Xilonen (maize at the stage of the young cob). The victim was decapitated on top of a pyramid and her heart removed.[(9)] Other sacrificial victims were thrown into the fire, thrown into the whirlpool of the lagoon of Pantitlan and

drowned, locked up in caves, hurled from heights, strangled, entombed and starved, or given up to unequal gladiatorial combat. Finally many sacrifices were followed by ritual cannibalism. The sacrifices were just one part of Aztec blood offerings. All the population had to participate in some form of self-sacrifice or bloodletting envisioned as a penitential act. The thorns of the succulent plant, maguey, were used to draw blood from the earlobes. In other ways, blood was drawn from the tongue, ears, genitals, and other parts of the body.

A whole mystique surrounded human sacrifice that we will analyze here, since it allows us to penetrate the deeper essence of the practice. David Carrasco indicates: "Blood was called *chalchiuh-atl* (precious water). Human hearts were likened to fine burnished turquoise, and war was *teoatl tlachinolli* (divine liquid and burned things). War was the place "where the jaguars roar, where feathered war bonnets heave about like foam in the waves. Death on the battlefield was called *xochimiquitzli* (the flowery death)."**(10)** "Do not fear my heart! In the midst of the plain my heart craves death by the obsidian edge. Only this my heart craves: death in war..." wrote a Nahua poet.**(11)** A whole worldview emerges even just from these definitions. The relationships between gods and human beings stand at the opposite end of the idea of co-creation that we have brought forth among the Maya, most particularly the one that emerges from the pages of the Popol Vuh. Thus it is no surprise that blood offerings were called *nextlasoalioia* (payment of debt) or *nextlanlli* (debt paid).

In many sacrifices the victim itself was given the role of *ixiptla* or deity impersonator. Let us look at the example of the ritual performed at the end of the month of *Toxcatl* (May 4 to 23). The ceremonies were performed in expectation of the rainy season. The required impersonator of the deity Tezcatlipoca, chosen long ahead of time, was a young man as physically perfect as possible. His training required flute playing, speech, and flower carrying. During the last month, the ixiptla was given four young wives who symbolized fertility goddesses. The marriage represented the coming period of the earth's fertility, following the long period of drought.**(12)** Impersonators led a special life previous to their death. A whole mystique also surrounded the rapport between victim and executioner. Although referring to earlier forms of sacrifice, D. Gillette points out that the sacrificed enemy kings or nobles were considered like brothers of the victorious lords. The victims were said to be divine protectors of those who sent them to their death.**(13)** Human sacrifice could be made appealing to the victims themselves by inducing in them the illusion of the exalted role they performed or coaxing them with privileges that engendered tendencies

towards escapism. In effect, what was instilled in them was the premature desire to leave the earth.

The examples of human sacrifice given earlier demonstrate that the rituals reconnected with the past. Although the forms were totally new, ceremonial life hearkened back to a common source, that of the Tzolkin and the Popol Vuh. The sacred calendar of 260 days was now called the Tonalpohualli. It was used only as the dynamic calendar in conjunction with the year of 365 days. However some aspects of the static Tzolkin seem to have survived in time. A confirmation of this also comes from Aztec astronomy. Not far from Mexico City to the southwest lie the ruins of Malinalco. The site seems to have had primarily astronomical purposes. There, carved inside the rock, is a unique, monolithic temple. In the upper semi-circular shrine are two statues of an eagle symmetrically disposed around the statue of an ocelot. The three are placed on a semi-circular bench. Equidistant from the three, in the center of the circle, is another eagle carved on the floor. Through the door of the temple, the sun shines at right angles over the head of the central eagle on the day of the winter solstice, feast of the patron deity Huitzilopochtli. Here too there is accord with Mayan tradition that celebrated Hunahpu in the dry season. Another monolithic temple found nearby is the Structure IV, consisting of a large rectangular platform. It faces east where a stairway is located. The solar temple's orientation is such that the sun is in alignment with the axis of symmetry when it rises on the dates of February 13 and October 29. J. Galindo Trejo believes that other horizon markers indicated the dates of April 29 and August 13.[(14)] A consistent pattern emerges from all of these observations. Both sets of dates divide the year into a 260/105 relation, the interval of the sacred calendar. We are familiar with the dates of April 29 and August 13, dates of the sun's zenith passage—not in Malinalco but at Izapa's latitude! Finally December 21 is the date that falls exactly in the middle of the interval of both dates. Although the Aztecs assigned totally new meanings to old mythology, they still took good care to justify the departures with strict adherence to the ancestral symbolism and cosmology of the Soconusco.

The review of Aztec festivals and rituals would not be complete without a mention of the ball game and the New Fire Ceremony. The ball game was originally devoted to the cult of the solar god and performed in the corresponding season, during the winter solstice. The ball game had been eclipsed from all of Teotihuacan civilization and reappeared, charged with new war-related meanings, with the later Toltecs of Tula. In an image of the

Codex Magliabechiano we see four human skulls towards the corners of the court, and at the center three death-heads associated with the god Mictlantecuhtli. With the Aztecs as well as with the Toltecs before them, the game had lost the solar connotation. It was simply a sacrificial game. The ball game acquired a further use as a form of divination. Games would be called to predict the outcome of future events. Finally, the game was used for gambling. People would lose their entire fortunes at the game and even wager their freedom.[15]

Of all Aztec ceremonies, none had the solemnity and the multiple layers of meanings of the New Fire Ceremony. The kindling of the New Fire, also called the "Binding of the Years," indicated the rebirth of the sun and fire, the renewal of the calendar and of time itself. On that date all the fires were extinguished. A victim was sacrificed and her heart removed. The fire lit in the cavity of the chest served to re-light the fire throughout the territory. The New Fire Ceremony stood for the preservation of order in the midst of threatening chaos. Here is the counterpart of the galactic meaning of the Izapan ball game in Aztec ritual. The need for the New Fire Ceremony, a ritual associated with the notion of cyclical time, squarely contradicts the notions of eternity associated with the galactic astronomy of the ball game.

Sahagun has preserved information about the last New Fire Ceremony, which occurred in AD 1507 to the south of Tenochtitlan. He records that the New Fire Ceremony was determined by the seasonal appearance of the Pleiades. Their midnight transit happened that year on November 14.[16] However they could not serve for a calibration of the calendar because, due to the precession of the equinoxes, after every 52-year cycle their transits would shift by thirteen days. The corrections to the calendar were probably done on a more regular basis. Nevertheless, the New Fire Ceremony had an important religious meaning, and played a central part in Aztec cosmology.

Tenochtitlan and the Fifth Sun

The Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan was discovered in 1968. It is situated in the very heart of Mexico City, close to the Zocalo—the main square and largest plaza of the city—and next to the cathedral. It is in fact mostly hidden from view until one reaches it. The excavations have left it in the middle of the surrounding structures, partly sunk under the level of the asphalt. The constructions, built with a dark lava rock, have an odd undulating gesture, resulting from years of tectonic movements in this place affected by earthquakes. The ruins offer the visitor a completely different

feeling from Izapa and Teotihuacan. What catches the visitor's attention most is the double platform of the larger pyramid dedicated to Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc, now sheltered by a corrugated aluminum roof. Right under the pyramid to the north is the house of the jaguars. There, one can reconstruct in the imagination what is known of the rituals that the Aztecs celebrated. It was a mix of historical interest and contradictory emotions that led me to visit the place where thousands of captive warriors marched in procession to reach the top of the platforms and be sacrificed by the priests. The sacrificial rock is still in place as well as the reproduction of a *chacmool*—a reclining human figure whose exact function is unknown—one of which adorned the Tlaloc shrine. Izapa, Teotihuacan, and Tenochtitlan: no three sacred precincts could better portray, in the shortest sequence, the whole evolution of the Mexican Mysteries.

Tenochtitlan! What is now the center of a large metropolis was once an island in the lake of Texcoco. Tenoch, a leader of the Aztec migration, had died in 1363, almost forty years after the foundation of the city. The Aztec migration myth tells us that on arriving at the island to which they had been exiled, the Aztecs found signs of the favor of their god Huitzilopochtli: a white juniper tree with two great rocks at its foot. From the rocks flowed a stream of two colors, one red, the other blue. That night the god promised them that they would see a further sign. This was the famous nopal cactus where the eagle had set a nest, which they found the next day. The cactus—Huitzilopochtli said—had sprouted in the place where had fallen the heart of Copil whom the man-god had slain. The first part of the myth, Eduardo M. Moctezuma indicates, is almost an exact repetition of the signs received by the Toltecs upon reaching what would become the future city of Cholula. In the Aztec myth, one day separates symbolically Toltec from Aztec history.[17]

Tenochtitlan became the center of Aztec cosmogony. An Aztec poem says, "Who could conquer Tenochtitlan, who could shake the foundation of heaven?"[18] According to the Cronica Mexicayotl, the city was built above two caves filled with water, one facing east, the other north. In those waters resided "the father and mother of gods," according to Sahagun.[19] This is a reference to historical precedents, such as the cave under the Pyramid of the Sun in the city of Teotihuacan. The Great Temple that encodes all of Aztec symbolism and cosmology is the heart of the sacred city. The two mythical caves reside in the underworld. The platform supporting the temple, with its representations of serpents, identifies the terrestrial level. The four tiers of the pyramid ascend to heaven, towards the double shrine of *Omeyoacan*, Place of Duality. The southern half, representing the patron god

Huitchilopochtli, symbolizes the hill of Coatepec where the god defeated his opponents. Faithful to the legend, at the base of the pyramid lay the famous large, round stone bas-relief that represents the body of the dismembered Coyolxauhqui. Associated with the stone were the skulls of many decapitated females. The serpents on this side of the pyramid are feathered serpents. The northern side of the temple represents the "Hill of Sustenance," or *Tonancatepetl***,** where Tlaloc was the deity. Serpents, goggle-eyed like Tlaloc, complete the allegorical setting. The sun rose behind Tlaloc during the wet season and behind Huitzilopochtli during the dry season, further reinforcing a symbolism that had remained unaltered for centuries.