THE COST OF COURAGE IN AZTEC SOCIETY*

Proud of itself
is the city of Mexico-Tenochtitlán.
Here no one fears to die in war.
This is our glory . . .

Who could conquer Tenochtitlán?
Who could shake the foundation of heaven?[1]

Today we are tempted to read this fragment of an Aztec[2] song-poem as a familiar piece of bombast: the aggressive military empire which insists on its invincibility, its warriors strangers to fear. In what follows I want to indicate how the business of war was understood in the great city of Tenochtitlán, and then, in more but still inadequate detail, to enquire into how warrior action was sustained and explained, in the hope of drawing closer to an Aztec reading of this small text.

I

That Tenochtitlán was the creation of war and the courage and stamina of its young fighting men was indisputable. The splendid city which Cortes and his men saw shimmering above its lake waters in the autumn of 1519 had been founded as a miserable collection of mud huts less than two hundred years before. Some time late in the twelfth century the final abandonment of the once-great imperial city

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[1] "Cantares mexicanos", fos. 19^{v}-20^{r}, trans. Miguel Leon-Portilla in his *Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico* (Norman, Okla., 1969), p. 87.

[2] The people who had come to dominate central Mexico at the time of European conquest, ruling their tribute empire from the island city of Tenochtitlán, called themselves the "Mexica" or the "Tenocha", but common usage has established them as the "Aztecs".

of Tula to the north had begun a restless movement of peoples southwards, to the gentler lands of the valley of Mexico. By the close of the thirteenth century more than fifty "miniscule polities" jostled in the valley, bound together by trade and increasingly, as population and ambition grew, by the determination to exact tribute from each other.[3] The Aztecs, latecomers in the migration, lived miserably and marginally on the narrow tolerance of their longer-settled neighbours until the lord of Azcapotzalco allowed them to settle the swampy lands in the south-west of Lake Texcoco. He had been impressed by their ingenious exploitation of previously despised lake resources; by their energetic reclamation of productive land through the dredging and piling system of *chinampa* agriculture long practised in the valley; and most of all by the unusual ferocity of their young fighting men.

The Aztecs were to live essentially as mercenaries for the next difficult years, as their city and neat patchwork of *chinampas* slowly grew. Their tribal deity Huitzilopochtli, who spoke through the mouths of his four god-bearer priests, had led them through the years of the migration, and with settlement internal affairs were ordered by the leaders of each *calpulli* or lineage group, who distributed land and labour and gathered the young men for war.[4] With time came the need for more formal and unified representation for negotiations with other valley peoples, so the *calpulli* leaders approached a prince of Culhuacan who could claim descent from the Toltecs of Tula to become their *tlatoani*, or "Speaker". The outsider was integrated into the group and created an instant aristocracy by the neat device of marrying twenty Aztec wives, one from each *calpulli*, or so the story goes.[5]

That first *tlatoani* probably had little influence on the administration of Aztec affairs, but in the late 1420s, a hundred years after the establishment of Tenochtitlán, there was a significant shift in the

[3] Edward A. Calnek, "Patterns of Empire Formation in the Valley of Mexico, Late Postclassic Period, 1200-1521", in George A. Collier, Renato I. Rosaldo and John D. Wirth (eds.), *The Inca and Aztecs States, 1400-1800: Anthropology and History* (New York, 1982), p. 44. Calnek elegantly reviews recent developments in this complex area.

[4] Gordon Brotherston, enquiring into Huitzilopochtli's "indelibly secular streak", suggests that a one-time leader was transformed into the god by the creators of the empire, as a vivifying figure of unbounded energy and terror. Gordon Brotherston, "Huitzilopochtli and What Was Made of Him", in Norman Hammond (ed.), *Mesoamerican Archeology: New Approaches* (London, 1974), pp. 155-65.

[5] More correctly, one of the stories: *Códice Ramirez: relación del orígen de los Indios que habitan esta Nueva España, según sus historias* (Mexico, 1944), p. 42. The few and sketchy accounts conflict for this early period.

locus of authority. Itzcoatl, son of the borrowed prince, in alliance with two other client cities, led his warriors against those of the overlord city and won. The spoils of victory — plunder, land and the labour to work it, even the chance of securing the tribute due to Azcapotzalco from its subject cities — lay in his hand. He chose not to distribute that wealth directly to the *calpullis*, but rather to his warriors and especially to his royal kin through the creation of an elaborate system of military offices and titles, each carrying with it rights to tribute and the produce of tribute fields. It has been persuasively argued that with Itzcoatl and his victory began the recruitment of *calpulli* leaders into service and identification with the nascent state, and the development of an increasingly sharp distinction between a privileged hereditary aristocracy and a tributary commoner class.[6] The *calpulli* was not extinguished: it remained the key local unit for the distribution of *calpulli* land and for the organization of labour for public works, war and collective ritual until the sixteenth century and the Spanish attack. But with Itzcoatl and those who followed him, both power and authority moved decisively from the locally based lineage groups to the palace of the ruler and the great temple complex adjacent to it.

Under Itzcoatl's successor Moctezuma the Elder the armies of the Triple Alliance of Tenochtitlán, Texcoco and Tlacopan spilled beyond the valley to carve out the broad shape of their magnificent if unstable tribute empire. That expansion was paralleled by the increasing magnificence of Tenochtitlán. In 1519, the last year of its grandeur, it contained perhaps 200,000 to 250,000 people, with many more densely settled around the lake margin. (Seville, the port of departure for most of the conquistadores, numbered in the same year not more than 60,000 persons.)[7] The city lived more by trade than tribute, but that trade had been stimulated and focused by war, just as its war-fed splendour attracted the most skilled artisans and most gifted singers to embellish its glory further.[8] The one-class society of

[6] J. Rounds, "Lineage, Class and Power in the Aztec State", *Amer. Ethnologist*, vi (1979), pp. 73-86. For a different emphasis, see Elizabeth M. Brumfiel, "Aztec State Making: Ecology, Structure and the Origins of the State", *Amer. Anthropologist*, lxxxv (1983), pp. 261-84.

[7] For a review of recent discussion on population figures, see William T. Sanders, Jeffrey R. Parsons and Robert S. Santley, *The Basin of Mexico: Ecological Processes in the Evolution of a Civilization* (New York, 1979). For Seville, see J. H. Elliott, *Imperial Spain, 1469-1716* (New York, 1964), p. 117.

[8] For trade and tribute into Tenochtitlán, and the development of hierarchy, see Calnek, "Patterns of Empire Formation in the Valley of Mexico"; Edward Calnek, "The Internal Structure of Tenochtitlán", in Eric R. Wolf (ed.), *The Valley of Mexico*

(cont. on p. 47)

the early days of hardship had given way to an elaborately differentiated hierarchy. But that hierarchy had been created through the distribution of the spoils of war, and success in combat remained its dynamic. Performance on the field of battle was as central for the confirmation of an elevated position as for escape from a lowly one, and concern regarding that performance gripped young males of all social ranks.

It also concerned those who directed the city. From the age of ten or eleven all commoner youths save those few dedicated to the priesthood came under the control of the "House of Youth", the warrior house in their own *calpulli*. These were not exclusively military schools: each lad was expected to master a range of masculine skills, most particularly the trade of his father. The great mass of Aztec warriors were essentially part-time, returning from campaigns to the mundane pursuits of farming, hunting or fishing, pulque brewing and selling, or the dozen other trades the city supported. Few commoners were so successful in battle as to emancipate themselves entirely from such labour. Nonetheless it was war and the prospect of war which fired imagination and ambition.[9] At fifteen the lads began intensive training in weapon-handling, gathering every evening in the warrior house with the mature warriors — local heroes — to learn the chants and dances which celebrated warriors past and the eternal excitements of war. Assigned labours became a chance to test strength, as boys wrestled logs from the distant forest to feed the never-dying fires in their local temple or to meet their ward's obliga-

(n. 8 cont.)
(Albuquerque, N.M., 1976), pp. 287-302; Johanna Broda *et al.*, *Estratificación social en la Mesoamérica prehispánica* (Mexico, 1976); Pedro Carrasco and Johanna Broda (eds.), *Economía política e ideología en el México prehispánico* (Mexico, 1978); Frances Berdan, "Trade, Tribute and Market in the Aztec Empire" (Univ. of Texas at Austin Ph.D. thesis, 1975).

[9] Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, 13 pts. (Santa Fe, 1950-82), bk. 8, ch. 20, pp. 71-2. Other information on warrior schools and the conduct of war is to be found in bk. 3, app., chs. 4-6; bk. 6, chs. 3, 21-31; bk. 8, chs. 12, 14, 17-18, 20-21, apps. B, C. See also, for the regalias and the training and disciplinary procedures, *Codex Mendoza*, ed. James Cooper Clark, 3 vols. (London, 1983); Thelma D. Sullivan, "Arms and Insignia of the Mexica", *Estudios de cultura náhuatl*, x (1972), pp. 155-93 (translation of the relevant sections of the Códice Matritense de la Academia de la Historia); Johanna Broda, "El tributo de trajes de guerreros y la estructuración del sistema tributario", in Carrasco and Broda (eds.), *Economía, política e ideología en el México prehispánico*, pp. 113-72. For garrisons, see C. Nigel Davies, "The Military Organization of the Aztec State", *Atti del XL congreso internazionale delli Americanisti*, xl pt. 4 (1972), pp. 213-21. Descriptions of campaigns are most abundant in Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias de Nueva-España y islas de Tierra Firme*, ed. Jose F. Ramirez, 2 vols. (Mexico, 1867-80).

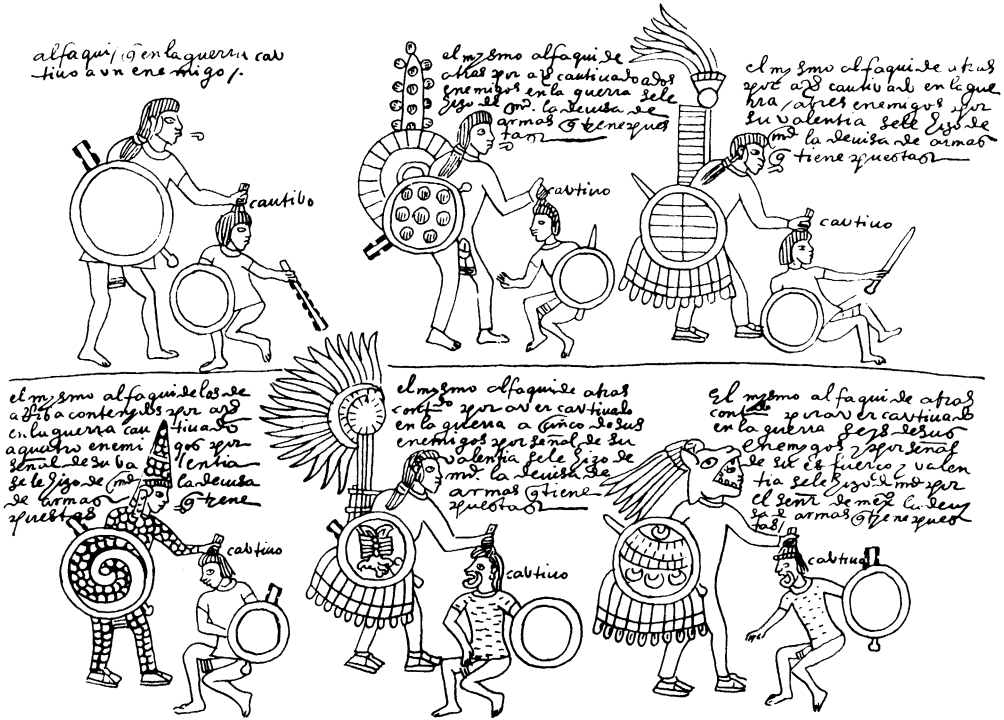
tions at the central temple precinct. But war provided the crucial and indeed the sole consequential test. Performance in that test was measured in a quite straightforward, arithmetical kind of way. Movement through the ranks of the warrior grades depended on taking alive on the field of battle a specified number of captives of specified quality. (See Plate 1.) Each promotion was marked by the award of designated insignia and by a distinctive cutting and arranging of the hair, although the "warrior lock", at the centre and slightly to the back of the head, was always kept intact. (Some of the most elevated warriors, the "shaven-headed Otomi", kept only that lock, bound with bright cord close to the scalp so that it floated banner-like above the shaven pate.) It was possible for the commoner who distinguished himself over several campaigns to graduate into the lower ranks of the royal administration, or even to enjoy the perquisites of lordship, at least for his lifetime. Rewards were not only individual: if success in battle brought increasingly gorgeous insignia and increasing opportunities for their public and ceremonial display, it also increased access to the goods of the tribute warehouse, which could then be dispersed to kin and friends: a nice example of vertical integration. The connection between the honours heaped on the triumphant warrior and the general benefits enjoyed by civilians associated with him by blood or friendship were well understood. Long after the conquest men recalled what happened when "the man dexterous in arms" was successful:

> such honour he won that no one anywhere might be adorned [like him]; no one in his [own] house might assume all his finery. For in truth [because] of his dart and his shield there was eating and drinking, and one was arrayed in cape and breechclout. For verily in Mexico were we, and thus persisted the reign of Mexico . . .[10]

The conditions of warrior training for the sons of the lords are less clear. Some appear to have been associated with local warrior houses, taking their specialized training there, while others, dedicated early to a particular order of warriors, trained within its exclusive house.[11]

[10] *Florentine Codex*, bk. 8, app. C, p. 89.

[11] For the warrior training of the sons of lords, see *Florentine Codex*, bk. 8, ch. 20. For training within the house of the knightly order, see Durán, *Historia*, ii, ch. 88. For the complex business of access of commoners to high military office, see Virve Piho, "Tlacatecutli, Tlacochtecutli, Tlacateccatl y Tlacochcálcatl", *Estudios de cultura náhuatl*, x (1972), pp. 315-28. My own suspicion is that a rhetoric of access and an actuality of restriction was tempered by the occasional exception — a not unfamiliar situation — but that the positions of *tlacateccatl* and *tlacochcálcatl* of Tenochtitlán were reserved to members of the ruling dynasty. See J. Rounds's absorbing discussion in his "Dynastic Succession and the Centralization of Power in Tenochtitlán", in Collier, Rosaldo and Wirth (eds.), *Inca and Aztec States, 1400-1800*, pp. 63-89.



1. Warrior-priests in various regalias awarded for taking between one and six captives. Codex Mendoza (*c.* 1541-2), fo. 65: Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS. Arch. Selden A.1.

While the lords certainly wore the hair cuts designating levels of prowess their ladder of promotion may not have coincided precisely with that climbed by commoners. It was probably significantly more rigorous. For a noble in the later years of empire the cost of cowardice was high. Access to office and the perquisites of office — its tribute fields, its dependent labourers — depended on adequate performance in battle, and the higher the office the more spectacular the required performance. The ruler himself was not exempt. His inner Council of Four, drawn from the royal kin, included the two highest military commanders, and the ruler himself had usually held one of those two positions. After his "election" by that same council, and the obligatory period of seclusion and fasting, his first public duty was to lead his fighting men to war, the splendour of his later installation being a direct measure of the success of his campaign.[12] (See Plate 2.)

A dramatic toughening in required warrior performance for the nobility had come in the middle years of the rule of Moctezuma the Elder, just before the Aztec expansion beyond the valley. Tlacaelel, a young general under Itzcoatl, adviser to Moctezuma and to three rulers after him, and chief architect and strategist of empire, made the new rules clear. The most coveted jewels, the richest cloaks and shields could no longer be bought in the market-place. They could be purchased only with valorous deeds. Any male who failed to go to war, even if he were the king's son, would be deprived of all signs of rank and would live as a despised commoner, while great warriors would eat from the king's dish. This was a sufficiently crucial matter to breach the hardening divisions of class: should a legitimate son prove cowardly, and the son of a slave or servant excel him in battle, the bastard would replace the coward as legitimate heir.[13] Furthermore Tlacaelel proclaimed the initiation of a particular kind of warfare against five precariously independent provinces across the mountains — provinces noted, as were the Aztecs, for the toughness of their fighting men. In these so-called "Flowery Wars" the sole end would be the mutual taking of warrior captives for ritual killing. At the same time Tlacaelel was preparing the great campaigns of subjugation which would bring hundreds, even thousands, of prisoners to Tenochtitlán. The building of the Great Temple was already in train. In the next years the Aztecs were to become notorious among their neighbours for their mass ceremonial killings, and for the extravagant theatricalism in which those killings were framed.

[12] *Florentine Codex*, bk. 8, ch. 18, *passim*.
[13] Durán, *Historia*, i, pp. 240-2.

2. A Warrior-king, Ixtlilxochitl of Texcoco. Codex Ixtlilxochitl (1582?), pt. 2, fo. 106: Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Mexicain 65-71.

It is tempting to see this intensification in military and religious ardour as a response to the events of the year One Rabbit, 1454 in our reckoning. Three seasons of wildly unstable weather, of snows and frosts and drought, had culminated that year in a great famine so severe as to threaten the life of the young city. Men sold themselves or their children into slavery for maize, and Moctezuma formally released his subjects from their duty, to seek their lives elsewhere. The next year had seen recovery with good rains and full harvest. Still, the sequence is seductive: the famine, and then the double drive to appease angry gods and to demonstrate, in face of the famine's bleak lesson as to the limits of coercion, the central role of the warrior in securing prosperity. So it has been conventionally understood, and so, perhaps, it happened. But two key sources note the famine as occurring after the initiation of the Flowery Wars and the renewed emphasis on warrior virtues.[14] Further, the conventional explanation derives its plausibility from concepts of causation and of the continuity and uniformity of the temporal process which are familiar to us, but alien to Aztecs. In their cyclic system each year, indeed each day, had its own particular and discrete characteristics. The glimpses we have of their understanding of the famine show them identifying or, more correctly, recognizing the year One Rabbit as characterized by dearth, and so planning to prepare for the recurrence of the dangerous year by the anxious storing of ordinarily despised foods. The famine's consequences were understood as short-term not so much because of opportune rains, but because of this "sufficient unto the year-sign are the evils thereof" kind of view. The year of the rains also saw the end of a fifty-two-year cycle, the completion of a "Bundle of Years". We are told that in the cleansing and renewal of the New Fire Ceremony of 1455 there was special happiness and rejoicing, "for thus it is ended; thus sickness and famine have left us".[15]

It is possible that the New Fire Ceremony, marking as it did the opening of a new epoch, had more to do with Aztec expansionism

[14] Hernando Alvarado Tezozómoc, *Crónica mexicana*, ed. M. Mariscal (Mexico, 1944), pp. 163-4; Durán, *Historia*, i, ch. 30. Regarding the effect on human population of the ritual killings, the most systematic estimate of the population of the valley of Mexico on the eve of conquest puts the number at 800,000 to 1,200,000: Sanders, Parsons and Santley, *Basin of Mexico*. Rapid intensification of agricultural techniques indicates the population pressed close to the valley's limits. However, the great mass of victims were drawn from beyond the valley, and even there the killing of relatively few young men (consensus hovers around 20,000 per year for all of central Mexico) could have had little impact on general population levels, although it would, presumably, debilitate potential military resistance.

[15] *Florentine Codex*, bk. 7, ch. 12, p. 31.

and a new vehemence in war and ritual action than the famine which preceded it. Clifford Geertz has warned of the insensitivity of modern Europeans to the possible complexities in the connections between what, following Bagehot, he calls the "efficient" and the "dignified" parts of government. He presents an example of the complexity by unravelling for our instruction the "politics of competitive spectacle" practised in the theatre state of nineteenth-century Bali.[16] In late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Mexico the politics of competitive spectacle were equally if differently crucial. Of course there was what is for us a reassuringly pragmatic edge to the Mexican activities. For those within the city, some of them "Aztec" only by adoption, others made restless by the intrusive demands of the state, those great ceremonial performances with their mass killings were a vivid reminder that there were clear advantages in being inside rather than outside the Aztec polity. Rulers of other territories, whether allies or enemies, were coerced into observing how Aztecs dealt with those who resisted them. But the significance of the performances went well beyond a conventional politics of terror. Their spectacular victories had persuaded the Aztecs that their own tribal deity Huitzilopochtli was in reality the Sun destined to rule through this current epoch. In the first days of empire Itzcoatl had taken the precautionary measure of destroying tribal records, to allow the construction of a past more compatible with the Aztec present and what he had come to recognize as the glory of their predestined future. But the other peoples of the valley had inconveniently long memories: they knew the Aztecs' miserable beginnings, and they too had tribal deities who hinted at glory and the destiny to dominate. The problem was to persuade not only Aztecs but other tribes that Aztec domination was no mere freak of fortune, an incident in the affairs of men, but part of the design of the cosmos. When actually or potentially recalcitrant tributaries were "invited" to Tenochtitlán's massive ritual displays, the gift exchanges in which they were obliged to participate were games of dominance and submission that the Aztec ruler, drawing on the resources of empire, routinely won. But the ceremonial performances they were then required to attend were not only statements about dominance. They were intended as the most efficacious of political acts; the most direct demonstration of the high legitimacy of Aztec supremacy.

[16] Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton, 1980), "Conclusion: Bali and Political Theory", pp. 121-36.

The city-itself, so recently constructed, imaged in its massiveness the massive presence of Tula, and before Tula of Teotihuacán. Its quadripartite divisions and its central temple precinct replicated the shape of the cosmos, while the great temple pyramid which dominated the precinct was a "cosmogram in stone",[17] asserting that here was the centre and creative core of the world, resting indeed upon "the foundation of heaven", and rising up as the Mountain of Sustenance, the Earth Mother from whose womb the Sun leaped, as he does at every dawning, to strike down his murderous sister Moon and to scatter the Uncounted Stars. Only the recently completed excavations of the Great Temple have revealed the full complexity of that stone tableau of the endless moment of the birth of the Sun, whose name, the Aztecs insisted, was Huitzilopochtli. Their best proof of that identification they presented in their sumptuously mounted, magnificently choreographed ritual performances, played out within those central sacred places. The heaped-up wealth, and above all the war captives massed for killing before Huitzilopochtli's shrine, declared that there was nothing fortuitous or merely human about Aztec success in war, and that resistance, or even resentment, was futile.

The declarations made in that theatre of dominance were understood by the Aztecs' neighbours, although few found them permanently compelling, as Cortes was to discover to his advantage. But in the Aztec politics of spectacle the great ceremonies which consumed so great a part of the fruits of war constituted the final, necessary and consummatory act of war; they transformed human victory into sacred destiny.

II

All of that great enterprise rested on the warriors: men who were, if we are to believe the chant, strangers to fear. It is now some years since two remarkable books, appearing in the confused and bitter aftermath of the war in Vietnam, swung the study of men in combat from its traditionally peripheral position very much closer to the

[17] This is the phrase which Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, archaeologist in charge of the recently completed excavations of the Templo Mayor in Mexico City, used in a paper delivered to Dumbarton Oaks Conference on the Aztec Templo Mayor, 8-9 Oct. 1983. Relevant commentaries can be found in H. B. Nicholson with Eloise Quiñones Keber, *Art of Aztec Mexico: Treasures of Tenochtitlán* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1983); Esther Pasztory, *Aztec Art* (New York, 1983). For a magnificent analysis of this and other complex matters, see Richard Townshend, *State and Cosmos in the Art of Tenochtitlán* (Washington, D.C., 1979).

centre of human studies. John Keegan's concern was to discover how men could be brought to fight on cue: indeed, how they could be brought to stand to fight at all, when confronted by the terrifying face of battle. How does a distant society contrive to reach into that "wildly unstable physical and emotional environment" to counter fear of wounds, death, abandonment? How, and how well, are men prepared for the actual experience of battle? And (a problem for historians) how are we, sitting pensive at our typewriters, to reconstruct any part of that experience? For Keegan the emphasis lay with how soldiers are made. Paul Fussell sought to trace how combatants in our own Great War struggled to make civilian experience relate to the experience of battle, and then how the experience of battle, and the men whose burden it had become, could be reintegrated into a society returned to peace.[18]

Aztecs were not soldiers, at least not in the modern European sense. While Agincourt would have been more intelligible to them than any battle which followed it, it would have seemed, with its archers and crossbowmen, its cavalry and infantry, an over-regimented and over-specialized affair. They had no organized "army", nor officers either. But the Aztec warrior, like the European soldier, was a social product: it should be possible to discover how he was made. He faced, again and again, the threat of injury or death deliberately inflicted: it should be possible to discover something of how that threat appeared to him. And, a man trained to violence, he moved constantly in and out of civilian society: it should be possible to discover how he made that passage. The benefits of warrior action and warrior status were manifest, and not all material. What concerns me now is to count the costs of Aztec courage.

There was, of course, the obvious and familiar cost of war: the grief attending the death of a loved father, son, husband, brother, friend. Women were allowed to weep for that, even in prospect. In the great festival which initiated the season of war the warriors received their insignia and danced in their glory to the high lament of the women who dreaded to see them go. A prayer to the warrior god acknowledges the anguish of the warrior's kin, "the old men, the old women . . . one's aunt, one's uncle . . . the mother who gave him strength, by whose side he was laid to sleep", who do not know how or where their young warrior will meet his death.[19]

[18] John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York, 1977), p. 487; Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford, 1975).

[19] *Florentine Codex*, bk. 3, ch. 3, pp. 11-15.

The kin had been well disciplined for the relinquishment. Childbed was conventionally designated a battlefield, where a woman could "take a captive" by capturing a baby. The midwife greeted the birth of a male child with warcries and a formal exhortation, addressed to the child, but directed, of course, to the panting, newly delivered mother, who was emphatically not given the baby to hold:

> My precious son, my youngest one . . . heed, hearken: thy home is not here, for thou art an eagle, a jaguar . . . here is only the place of thy nest . . . out there thou has been consecrated . . . War is thy desert, thy task. Thou shalt give drink, nourishment, food to the sun, lord of the earth . . . perhaps thou wilt receive the gift, perhaps thou wilt merit death by the obsidian knife . . . The flowered death by the obsidian knife [that is, death on the killing stone].

A sufficiently explicit intervention by society in a zone we might consider private. It was the parents who then formally dedicated the infant to war, presenting him to the "Rulers of Youth" at the local warrior house, where he would live from puberty to marriage:

> Our lord has given a jewel, a precious feather; a child has arrived . . . he is your property, your child, he is your son. In your laps, in the cradle of your arms, we place him. For there are your sons; you instruct them, you make Eagle warriors, you make Jaguar warriors . . .[20]

A sufficiently decisive relinquishment. Nonetheless such disciplining neither did nor was expected to obliterate sentiment.

If success had its negative aspects, and as will be seen they were several, failure could be a lifetime bitterness. One strength of the Aztec system was that it was not necessary to succeed to survive: it was possible to live by one's own labour, saved from want by periodic handouts from the tribute warehouse or from a successful neighbour or kinsman. But failure was public, and publicly marked, at an age when such marks burn deep. From about ten each lad grew a long lock of hair at the nape of the neck, which remained uncut until he had participated in the taking of a captive on the field of war. If after two or three campaigns he still had not forced himself to enter the fray — and it was always possible to hang back — he was thrown out of the warrior house, his head shaven in a tonsure to dramatize the loss of the warrior lock and to prepare him for the carrying pad of humble labour: forever a peripheral man.

Long-distance campaigns, increasingly frequent as the empire grew and its edges so frequently unravelled, had their special hardships for all warrior grades. While the ruler took official responsibility for provisioning his warriors, a sensible man carried what he could of

[20] *Ibid.*, bk. 3, ch. 4, p. 51.

dried maize cakes, bean flour and crushed seeds, a dour but surprisingly nutritious diet. As long as the route lay through "friendly" territories he could presumably hope for some supplementary supplies, as any defect in hospitality could be defined as a lack of proper friendliness.[21] In unequivocally hostile zones there was the chance of plundering local food supplies. But always the living was hard. Aztec armies took few carriers and cooks with them. Food was the dried rations mixed with water and swallowed down, and sleep a matter of wrapping close in a cloak and stretching out on the ground. These hardships probably troubled Aztecs little: they were used to cold, having in their nightly dancing gone nearly naked, at over 7,000 feet elevation a chilly business, while the frequency of ritual engagement through fasting and vigil had taught them to survive on poor food and little sleep over long periods.

However informal their provisioning, the warriors marched in reasonably orderly sequence, grouped according to their localities, and in joint enterprises, their cities. While spies scouted ahead, and there was hopeful talk of devious ways to penetrate the target town, they usually found the defending warriors massed to meet them close by their city. Victory came when so many individual warriors had been brought to flee as to make for a general rout. Here the pure fury of the Aztec warrior was at its most impressive. Such a warrior "hurled himself against the foe . . . he shook others off scornfully, drove them into corners, broke into enemy ranks, took after those who fled, threw himself upon them . . . He aroused complete terror . . .".[22] The attackers then pursued the fleeing defenders into the city, assaulted the main temple and put its shrine to the torch. When the temple burst into flame, resistance ceased. (In the painted Mexican books the conventional sign for conquest is a pyramid temple with a burning brand thrust into it.) The victors settled to pillage at leisure, until their leaders could be brought to listen to the increasingly desperate pleas and offers of the defeated. Then tribute terms were set (see Plate 3), Huitzilopochtli's image installed in the refurbished temple, and an image of the local tribal deity carried back at the head of a long train of captives to a jubilant Tenochtitlán. Only in the case of chronically restless tributaries or to secure a specially useful trade route was a governor or a garrison imposed.

If we find the wars on the edges of empire reassuringly instrumental

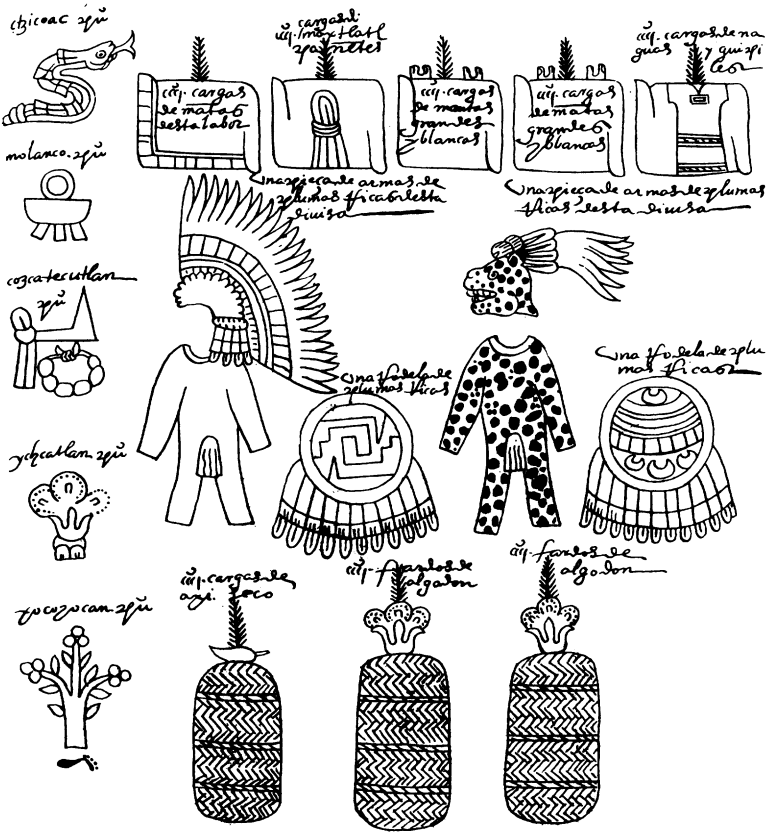
[21] For example, Durán, *Historia*, i, p. 172.
[22] *Florentine Codex*, bk. 4, ch. 10, pp. 38-9.

affairs, yielding so many bunches of feathers, so many loads of cacao, there are indications that for Aztec fighting men they were less satisfactory, with either too much or too little resistance. (Of the 24,000 Aztec and allied wariors who went out against the Tarascans only 4,000 limped back to their cities.) "Barbarians" fought by different rules or, as it seemed to the men of Tenochtitlán, by no rules at all. And distance could preclude the bringing back of captives, so they had to be killed on the spot. More rewarding emotionally and morally were wars fought closer to home, against opponents of like mind.

Just how those more serious wars were experienced — how the "face of battle" appeared to the Aztec warrior — has to be pieced together from very disparate kinds of sources, and troubling blurs and blanks remain. Some of the most poignant texts are those relating to the last great battles fought for Tenochtitlán between Aztec warriors and the Spanish and native forces led by Cortes, for there we have accounts from both sides.[23] But for the reconstruction of Aztec battle their use is limited: what they demonstrate most powerfully is that warfare is as much a cultural expression as worship, and that when such unlike enemies, sharing no language for communication, engage, they can only end, like Konrad Lorenz's turkey and peacock, with the one pecking the other to death.

What is clear is that Aztec combat was highly individualistic, and depended utterly on the courage of the individual. For his first venture into war the fledgeling warrior went only as an observer, to "carry the shield" of an experienced warrior whose technique he was to study. On his second time out he was expected to participate in a group capture: up to six novices could combine to drag a warrior down. The body of the victim of the joint assault was later exquisitely portioned out: torso and right thigh to the major captor, left thigh to the second; right upper arm to the third; left upper arm to the fourth;

[23] The major Nahuatl accounts are in the *Florentine Codex*, bk. 12. For a modernized and reorganized translation, see Bernadino de Sahagún, *The War of Conquest: How It Was Waged Here in Mexico*, trans. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (Salt Lake City, 1978). See also "Historia de Tlatelolco desde los trempos mas remotos" (1528), in *Unos annales históricos de la nación mexicana*, ed. Heinrich Berlin (Mexico, 1948). For the major Spanish accounts, see Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, ed. and trans. A. P. Maudslay, 5 vols. (Hakluyt Soc., 2nd ser., xxiii-xxv, xxx, xl, London, 1908-16); Hernan Cortes, *Letters from Mexico*, ed. and trans. A. R. Pagden (New York, 1971). Patricia Fuentes, *The Conquistadors* (London, 1963), conveniently offers English translations of other Spanish participants' accounts.



3. An Aztec tribute list. The five towns on the left paid four hundred mantles in each specified design, dried chillies, cotton and feathered warrior suits, head-dresses and shields. Codex Mendoza, fo. 54.

right forearm to the fifth; and left forearm to the sixth.[24] With that initial capture, co-operation was at an end: from that time on the youth was in direct competition with his peers, as he searched through the dust-haze and the mind-stunning shrieking and whistling to identify and engage with an enemy warrior of equal, or preferably just higher, status. The nice portioning out of the first captive suggests that even there in-group ranking was more important than any notion of team spirit.

The lads of each warrior house had lived and trained together, and we could expect some camaraderie to have developed. Discipline within the houses was maintained by a kind of extreme prefect system, with peers set to watch peers and to punish delinquents with savage beatings, or with the searing from the head of the treasured warrior lock. Would male bonding have survived all that — or, perhaps, thrived on it? Certainly sentiment towards one's companions on the field of battle was firmly and officially discouraged. To go to the aid of a threatened comrade would probably provoke a charge of having tried to steal his captive, and not only the false claiming of a captive, but the giving of one's captive to another, was punishable by death.

The task of the men we would be tempted to call officers was to order the initial disposition of the warriors, to develop the element of surprise as much as their impatience would allow, and to form up the lines for the attack, dealing out rough discipline as the men jostled for advantage. Once the conchshell trumpets had blasted they had no further role save to adjudicate conflicts over captives among their own men. It was the great warriors who leapt forward, lending courage and inciting emulation by their own superb example.

Analysis of the Aztec armoury intensifies the impression that serious combat was very much a one-to-one, hand-to-hand affair. While they had spears and bows and arrows, these projectile weapons were probably discharged early, and largely for irritating effect. The best evidence of their lack of penetrating power was the Spaniards' early adoption of the native quilted cotton armour, which they found adequate to deflect all but the luckiest shot. The slingshot was probably more valued, giving hope of the opportune stunning of a potential captive. (Spaniards clung to their metal helmets.) The preferred weapon for combat was the *macana*, the heavy flat oak club, each edge studded with flint or obsidian blades. The small shield offered sturdy and mobile protection for all the delicacy of its feather-

[24] *Florentine Codex*, bk. 8, ch. 21, p. 175.

work and gilding, being solidly built from bamboo or fire-hardened wood with hide reinforcing, while the close-fitting warrior suit with its bird or animal "head" was almost as light and flexible as the feathers from which it was made. The standards which rose up so imposingly were constructed on a fine wicker frame which strapped neatly to the back and offered no impediment to action. (See Plate 4.)

Given that the preferred form of combat was the duel with a matched opponent, locating an appropriate antagonist in an ordinary battle could be a vexing affair, especially for the more elevated ranks, which suggests the utility of the banners and head-dresses floating above the swirl of the battle. The great warrior's best protection against being molested by trivial and over-ambitious opponents was the terror inspired by the ferocity of his glance, the grandeur of his reputation, and the fact that every warrior bore his war record inscribed in his regalia. But it was a limited protection. A novice warrior could flinch and edge away if suddenly confronted by the looming figure of an Eagle or Jaguar knight, or even take to his heels, with no more penalty than private shame, but more established warriors strove to proclaim boundless courage in every gesture, so it could be a difficult thing to disengage from a mutually unwanted encounter. The élite corps in the Aztec system took special vows, some never to turn their backs in battle, and others, even more superb, not to take a backward step. This latter group perhaps mitigated the magnificent arrogance of the vow by habitually fighting in pairs, which meant some protection on the flank. They were kept to their vows: should one fall, and his disoriented partner turn to flee, he was deprived of all his honours and expelled from the company of warriors.[25] But unacceptably lowly challengers or the swarms of eager juveniles eager to test their collective strength must have marred the experience for the authentic connoisseur. For those warriors who had gazed longest and most steadily upon the face of battle there was a special kind of war: the "Flowery Wars" initiated by the first Moctezuma.

Modern commentators rendered uneasy by their difficulty in penetrating "beneath the religious cloak to the underlying material causes and issues",[26] as one of them puts it, have emphasized the importance of the Flowery Wars for the training of neophyte Aztec warriors, who

[25] *Ibid.*, bk. 8, app. C, p. 88.

[26] Frederic Hicks, "'Flowery War' in Aztec History", *Amer. Ethnologist*, vi (1979), p. 87.

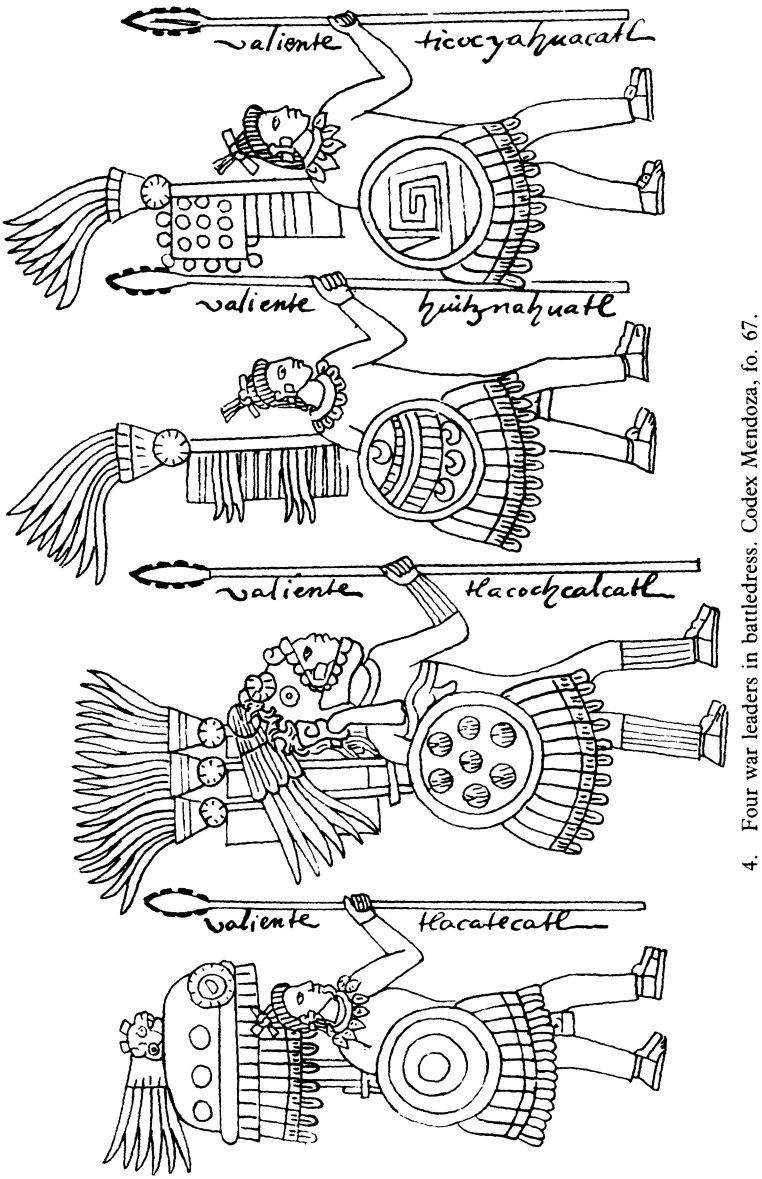
would presumably then go and fight more intelligibly materialistic wars somewhere else. But it was only the best of established Aztec warriors who marched out on those scheduled occasions to meet the leading warriors of the transmontane provinces: indeed after attaining a certain eminence status could only be enhanced by taking a captive from one of those states which participated wholly, if perhaps not wholly voluntarily, in the Aztec ethos. Here there was no purpose and no outcome save the mutual taking of captives for ritual killing. It is also worth noting that while in other kinds of wars the odds normally heavily favoured the Aztecs (the Tarascan disaster being unique), in these combats the odds were always even.

It was on that field of battle that the Aztec aesthetic of war could be most perfectly displayed and most profoundly experienced; and here "aesthetic" must be understood to comprehend moral and emotional sensibilities. Glimpses in both the painted and written sources suggest that combat was initiated by a formal rhetoric of gesture, with a "presentation stance" of the club arm dropped and the body in a half-crouch. Since each warrior had an interest in not damaging his opponent too severely, there being no honour to be won by killing in the field, and a maimed man being useless for the most engrossing rituals, it is likely there was an initial preference for using the flat side of the club to stun, resorting to the cutting edges only when faced with a singularly difficult antagonist.

The action, when it came, was very fast: the clubs, although heavy, were handy. Even against the quite unfamiliar bulk and speed of a Spanish horseman native warriors could calculate their blows for maximum effectiveness through a remarkable combination of speed, strength, balance and timing.[27] The aim was to stun or sufficiently disable one's opponent so that he could be grappled to the ground and subdued. It is possible that the seizing of the warrior lock (see Plate 1), the formal sign of dominance in the pictographic codices, was accepted as deciding the matter, or so the elaborately bound and defiantly graspable warrior lock of the "shaven-headed Otomi" would suggest.

The dramatic shape of the combat, its "style", was poised stillness exploding into violent action. Aztecs described the two creatures

[27] For example, Bernal Diaz's awed recollections in his *True History of the Conquest of New Spain*, i, pp. 229-32. There are useful pictorial representations in the *Florentine Codex*, but perhaps those of the Lienzo de Tlaxcala are most graphic, being cartoons of actual encounters, although typically encounters between natives and Spaniards: *El Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, ed. Alfredo Chavez (Mexico, 1979).



4. Four war leaders in battledress. Codex Mendoza, fo. 67.

most closely associated with warriors in the following terms: "the eagle is fearless . . . it can gaze into, it can face, the sun . . . it is brave, daring, a wingbeater, a screamer . . .".[28] The lordly jaguar, "cautious, wise, proud . . . reserved", if troubled by a hunter first seats itself, casually deflecting the flying arrows, and then "stretches, stirs . . . and then it springs". And so dies the hunter.[29]

A vignette from a major warrior festival called the Feast of the Flaying of Men points in the same direction. Very briefly, those warriors who offered a captive at the pyramid killings on the first day of the festival were decked in the flayed skins of the victims and displayed at appointed places within the city, where they became challenges to the audacity of relatively untested youths. There sat the great warriors, impassive in their skins. The youths had to bring themselves to advance, in a thrilling game of critical distances, to "snatch at their navels" and so "bring out their rage, their anger". That is, they had to make a full-frontal approach to a terrifying figure, just as was required on the field of battle — a figure who might explode into action at any moment (and did, for warriors would suddenly take off after the boys and give any they caught a thorough drubbing).[30]

Explosions of anger, paralysing eruptions of rage, transformations from the stillness of perfect control to furious violence — great Aztec warriors would seem to be uncomfortable people to be with. And lesser warriors had less control. Young men kept at a pitch for war and trained to a style of touchy arrogance were hard to maintain peaceably in a city. To an outsider there was a startling incidence of violence tolerated within Aztec society, much of it generated from the young men in the warrior houses. So-called "ritual combats", which had little pretence about them, raged through the streets, as priests and warriors fought out their antagonisms, or as warriors harassed the surrogate "captives" whom merchants were authorized to offer at what warriors claimed as a warrior ceremony. On those occasions, ordinary people had to do their best to keep out of the way. On other occasions — playful occasions, but Aztecs had very rough notions of play — the townsfolk were themselves the victims, likely to be despoiled of their cloaks, or intimidated into offering "tribute" to a squad of young men. This casual tribute could become institutionalized: the ruler found it necessary to pronounce the death

[28] *Florentine Codex*, bk. 11, ch. 2, p. 40.
[29] *Ibid.*, bk. 11, ch. 1, pp. 2-3.
[30] *Ibid.*, bk. 2, ch. 21, p. 50.

penalty against those men of the warrior houses who dared to levy "tribute on the town, of *chocolatl*, of food, of whatsoever they wished . . .".[31] The lavish gifts regularly exacted from the merchants by the great warriors were transparently a levy, an insurance against pillage.

So, it would seem, society strove to contain and limit the undesired costs of courage by a determined effort to impose order on the unruly men of war. Penal codes were savage, with swift and violent retribution laid down for all socially disruptive acts, from drinking and adultery to theft and extortion, and the higher the rank the more strenuous the punishment.[32] Public rhetoric insisted on the virtues of humility, modesty, frugality, self-control. In the formal homilies delivered at all moments of social transition, in which the wisdom of the elders was distilled, youth was constantly urged to a self-effacing submissiveness, to go "with thy head bowed, thy arms folded, thy head lowered . . . with weeping, with sighing, with meekness".[33] These recommendations were made in a society which rewarded its warriors with the opportunity to bask in public adulation, and in the very public display of magnificent costumes, plumes and jewels. On the one hand we have high and gaudy rewards for aggression: on the other, formal denunciations of aggressive behaviour and of personal vanity. Is this simply a "contradiction", the manifestation of the strain imposed on a society avid for the material rewards of empire but unprepared for its social costs, and so developing a rhetoric of control to net a violent reality of its own making?

So to see it is to miss the opportunity to explore Aztec understandings of violence, and the deeper bonds between warrior and society. The most extreme forms of violence were, after all, officially imported into the city, in the great killing rituals which marked most collective occasions. Nor were these killings remote top-of-the-pyramid affairs. The victims, living and dead, were endlessly moved about the neighbourhoods; in one festival the lieutenant of Huitzilopochtli ran through the streets slaughtering slaves staked out like goats along his way; in the Feast of the Flaying of Men, as we have seen, men in newly flayed human skins skirmished through the streets — and then went on to penetrate individual houses:

[31] *Ibid.*, bk. 8, ch. 14, p. 43.

[32] In his first address to the people after his installation, the ruler dwelt at length on the horrors, and the dangers, of jimson weed, pulque and all other restraint-reducing substances. Drinking at least was probably very much more widespread — and covertly tolerated — than the formal homilies admit. *Ibid.*, bk. 8, ch. 14.

[33] *Ibid.*, bk. 6, ch. 20, p. 111.

> . . . They pursued one. Many appeared. All went wearing the skin, dripping grease, dripping blood, thus terrifying those they followed . . . and then the young men garbed like Xipe Totec, wearing human skins . . . went everywhere from house to house. They were placed upon seats of sapote leaves; they provided them with necklaces formed of maize ears; they placed garlands of flowers upon their shoulders; they placed crowns of flowers upon their heads . . .[34]

A simple notion of the unforeseen and undesired consequences of military expansion will not penetrate far into this. Only through the glass of ritual action, smoky and obscure as that glass is, do we have much chance of discerning how violence, on the field of battle and off it, was understood, and how warrior and civilian society cohered.

III

Analysis of ritual has come to have rather a bad name among historians, for good and bad reasons. No general brief can be developed for its universal utility: rituals relate variously to the societies which produce them. They may also be analysed from different perspectives. Let it be granted at the outset that Aztec rituals dramatized social hierarchy, and so — probably — reinforced it; that they provided the occasion for the redistribution of goods and for reciprocal exchanges; that the bloodier rituals were consciously used to terrify recalcitrant tributaries. I want to set these narrowly instrumental notions aside, to seek through the analysis of one small sequence of ritual action what Victor Turner has called the "root paradigms" of a culture: those "irreducible life stances" displayed not in theological systems or explicitly stated moralities but "in the stress of vital action [where] firm definitional outlines become blurred by the encounter of emotionally charged wills".[35] That pursuit involves two major claims: that Aztec rituals were areas of vital action, and that we are, at this distance, able adequately to reconstruct them.

Ritual constantly structured Aztec experience, from the cloud of customs ordering response to the events of the individual life to the high dramas of public ceremonial. The Aztecs in effect concocted much of that public ceremonial cycle after their arrival in the valley, building on the eighteen-month seasonal calendar of its settled agriculturalists, and integrating into that calendar rituals they found compelling from other zones, or dramatizing their own mythic past, or celebrating their own already mythic victories. Tensely involved in

[34] *Ibid.*, bk. 1, ch. 18, pp. 39-40.

[35] Victor Turner, "Religious Paradigms and Political Action", in his *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Actions in Human Society* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London, 1974), p. 64.

change, they struggled through ritual at once to dramatize coherence and continuity, and to explore those strains, like the deep ambivalence veining the merchants' position, or the irritable competitiveness between trainee priests and warriors, contingent on that change. Aztec rituals were living maps of current and dynamic meanings, more street theatre than museum piece. The great, intricately woven skein of ceremonial action which bound time and seasons and men together is best understood as an intensified discourse: a discourse framed in declaratory statements but also permitting, through a developed vocabulary of feathers and fire and human bodies living and dead, a tense, continuous investigation into the nature of things.

Few material traces of Aztec rituals survived the conquest. There are the magnificent remains of the temple precinct recently excavated in Mexico City, and the rest of the archaeological material exhumed over the years. There is the scatter of objects retrieved from the store-rooms of Europe. None of the surviving pre-conquest pictographic codices is certainly from the valley of Mexico. The Codex Borbonicus (see Plate 8) is Aztec, and if not pre-conquest a very early copy, and contains a section on the rituals of the solar calendar, but it (like the other codices) resists confident interpretation.[36] To compensate for this sparsity there is a mass of Spanish writing on Aztec ritual and religion, most particularly from men professionally interested in such matters, the missionary friars, and they provide engrossing and indispensable sources. But if "professional interest" focuses attention, it can also blinker it. The writings of the Dominican Diego Durán exemplify some of the weaknesses of the genre. They contain vivid and apparently richly detailed descriptions of ritual action. But those descriptions are very much constructs, welding together fragments of information from different regions — it is "Indian religion" he is after — and readily incorporating dubious detail, and even more dubious psychology.[37] For Durán there is nothing, finally, problem-

[36] For the objects and the excavations, see Nicholson and Quiñones Keber, *Art of Aztec Mexico*; Pasztory, *Aztec Art*. Recent attempts to discover the syntax of the codices are discussed in Edward B. Sisson, "Recent Work on the Borgia Group Codices", *Current Anthropology*, xxiv (1983), pp. 653-6.

[37] For example, Durán gave a vivid and moving account of the death of a warrior going as a messenger to the Sun on the Cuauhxicalli, or Stone of Tizoc; he described the warrior's throat as being slit, and the blood conducted along a groove in the stone: Durán, *Historia*, ii, ch. 88. The groove was cut into the stone some time after the conquest. Tlacaelel is presented as the "devilish inventor of cruel and terrifying sacrifices", and as concocting the Feast of the Flaying of Men, for example, out of his own evil imagination to celebrate the victory of the Aztecs over the Huasteca: Durán, *Historia*, i, ch. 20.

atical about what the Indians were up to: he knew he was looking at the work of the Devil.

Only one source to my knowledge gives us accounts from the native point of view. The Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagún collected accounts of pre-conquest life from native informants at three separate locations, having them questioned by mission-trained native scribes, who then wrote down their Nahuatl speech in European script. The Nahuatl compilation produced by this process has been named by scholars the Florentine Codex. It bears the marks of its colonial context in the initial structuring of the questions, as in Sahagún's editings and selections. There are obscurities within it, as there are conflicts with Sahagún's own Spanish gloss. But the codex derives narrowly from Tenochtitlán and its sister city Tlatelolco,[38] and preserves the accounts of participants in those sacred performances of long ago. It is therefore the incomparable source for my purposes, as those narratives, obscure and difficult as they are, are the products of the minds I seek to penetrate.

To return, then, to the Feast of the Flaying of Men. With the first gathering of the agricultural harvest and the onset of the frosts the Aztec season of war began. Eighty days after that harvest, the first crop of warrior captives was killed, and eighty days after that, as the first signs of spring indicated the beginning of the planting season, came the Feast of the Flaying of Men. It was an important festival in that its first two days and all the evenings of the twenty days to follow required the attendance of those in authority in Tenochtitlán. It starred the warriors, especially the great warriors, and it honoured Xipe Totec, the Flayer or the Flayed One,[39] who was associated with

[38] The conditions of Sahagún's enterprise are most conveniently laid out in Charles Dibble, "Sahagún's Historia", in *Florentine Codex*, pt. 1, pp. 9-23. See also Alfredo López Austin, "The Research Method of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún: The Questionnaires", in Munro S. Edmonson (ed.), *Sixteenth-Century Mexico: The Work of Sahagún* (Albuquerque, N.M., 1974), pp. 111-49. The translation of particular passages remains in dispute, usually because of obscurities in the initial transcription. For the focus on Tenochtitlán and Tlatelolco, see H. B. Nicholson, "Tepepolco, the Locale of the First Stage of Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún's Great Ethnographic Project: Historical and Cultural Notes", in Hammond (ed.), *Mesoamerican Archeology*, pp. 145-54.

[39] For a different translation of "Xipe Totec", see Alfredo López Austin, *Hombre-dios: religión y política en el mundo náhuatl* (Mexico, 1973). For a different reconstruction of some of the action of Tlacaxipeualiztli, see Johanna Broda de Casas, "Tlacaxipeualiztli: A Reconstruction of an Aztec Calendar Festival from 16th Century Sources", *Revista española de antropología americana*, v (1970), pp. 197-274. Broda has attempted to piece together a composite account from diverse sources. It is a gallant and impressively scholarly attempt, but in my view rests on the mistaken epistemological assumption that our notions of plausibility are an adequate guide for the reconstruction of the actions and meanings of alien peoples. On that issue, see Paul Rock, "Some

(cont. on p. 69)

the east, a zone of plenty, and with the early spring, and who was represented by a priest wearing a flayed human skin, and a mask of a flayed human face. (See Plate 5).

The first day of the festival saw the killing of the less important war captives. The victims, decked in elaborate regalia, were brought from the local warrior houses in which they had been kept, tended and displayed since their capture, and delivered by their captors to the priests waiting at the foot of Xipe's pyramid in the main temple precinct. Ideally they were meant to go leaping up the steps of the pyramid, shouting the chants of their city as they went, and some did: others had to be dragged up by the priests. At the top, before the shrine, they were flipped on their backs over a small upright stone, a priest securing each limb, while a fifth priest struck open the chest with a flint knife, took out the heart, and raised it towards the sun. (See Plate 6.) The body was sent hurtling and tumbling down the stairs to be collected at the bottom by old men from the appropriate ward temple, where they carried it to be flayed and dismembered, probably by the captor. One thigh was reserved to Moctezuma, the other and most of the rest of the body going to the captor, who summoned his kin to a feast at his house. There, amid weeping and lamentations, the kinsmen of the captor each ate a small piece of flesh served with a dish of "dried" (unsoftened?) maize kernels. The captor himself, whose splendid captor's regalia had been replaced by the white chalk and feathers which marked the victim destined for the killing stone, did not participate in the feast.

The killings at the pyramid went on for much of the day. It is difficult to establish the numbers usually killed — presumably that varied according to the fortunes of war — but perhaps sixty or so died. It was those captors who on the following day were displayed in the city in their victims' skins, and who were teased into skirmishings by the foolhardy lads of the town in the episode already described. But it is what happened later on that second day which seems to have been the most compelling sequence in the whole complex affair. It also involved a mode of killing specially identified with the Aztecs, revived in Tenochtitlán to mark the victory of Moctezuma the Elder over the Huastecs.

For this ritual only the greatest captives were selected, their captors being accordingly the more honoured. The victims were chosen to

(n. 39 cont.)
Problems in Interpretative Historiography", *Brit. Jl. Sociology*, xxvii (1976), pp. 353-86.

die on what the Spaniards later dubbed the gladiatorial stone, at the base of Xipe's pyramid. They had been rehearsed for the occasion. Their captors had presented them to the people in a sequence of different regalias over the preceding four days, at the place where they were to die. There they were forced to engage in mock combats, and then to submit to a mock heart excision, the "hearts" being made of unsoftened maize kernels. The night before their deaths they spent in vigil with their captors, their warrior lock being cut and taken at midnight. Then early in the afternoon of that second day of Xipe's festival they were marshalled close to the stone, their captors still beside them, before assembled dignitaries and as many other people as could fit into the temple precinct, as four of the greatest Aztec warriors, two from the order of Jaguar warriors, two from the order of Eagles, presented their weapons in dedication to the sun. Then down from Xipe's pyramid came in procession the high priest of Xipe Totec in the regalia of his lord, followed by the other high priests as representatives of their deities, to take their seats around the gladiatorial stone. This was a performance worthy of the contemplation of the gods.

The stone was about waist high, and a metre and half wide, but set on an elevated platform about the height of a man.[40] The first victim, now stripped of his regalia and clad only in a loincloth, was given a draught of "obsidian wine" — pulque, the Aztec alcoholic drink, probably spiked with a drug from their ample pharmacopoeia — and tethered by the waist to a rope fastened at the centre of the stone. He was presented with weapons; four pine cudgels for throwing, and a war club. The club was studded not with flint or obsidian blades, but with feathers. Then the first Jaguar warrior, equipped with a real club, advanced and engaged him in combat. (See Plate 7.)

There must have been a system of timing of rounds or of counting passes or exchanges, although it is not recorded, because exceptionally fine fighters were sometimes able to survive the assaults of all four warriors. In those cases a fifth warrior, a left-hander, was brought into play to bring him down. When he was down, the lord Xipe advanced, struck open the breast and cut out the heart, which was raised "as a gift" to the sun, and then placed in the eagle vessel in which it would be later burned. The priest then submerged a hollow cane in the blood welling in the chest cavity, and raised the cane, so,

[40] Durán, *Historia*, i, ch. 20, p. 175.

5. Aztec stone carving of Xipe Totec seated and wearing the flayed skin of a warrior victim (note the dangling hands and the separate "face" mask): Museum für Volkerkunde, Basle.

as it was said, "giving the sun to drink". The captor was given the cane and a bowl of the blood which he carried throughout the city, daubing the blood on the mouths of the stone idols in all the temples. The circuit completed, he went to Moctezuma's palace to return the magnificent regalia of he who offers a victim at the gladiatorial stone, and from there went back to his local temple to flay and dismember his captive's body. And then, later in the day, he watched his lamenting kin eat the maize stew and the flesh of his captive, while they wept for their own young warrior. He did not participate, saying "Shall I perchance eat my very self?".[41] Meanwhile at the foot of Xipe's pyramid other victims had been tethered to the stone, and had fought and died. At the end of the day, when the last of the victims had been dispatched, the priests performed a dance with their severed heads, which were then skewered on the skull rack beside the stone.

It is obvious even from this sketchy account that a great many things were going on, but I want to focus on what was understood to be happening on the actual stone. There are a thousand ways of killing a man, but why tether him to a stone, restricting his movements but giving him the advantage of height? Why arm him with a club, a formidable weapon in its weight and reach, but with its effectiveness reduced by the replacement of its cutting blades with feathers? And why, given this finely calculated inequality, did the victim co-operate? It was clearly imperative that he fight, and fight as well as he was able: for this ritual only warriors from tribes fully participant in Aztec understandings of war were chosen. He could not fight for his life, for that was forfeit. Why then?

He, like his Aztec counterparts, had been long prepared. From his earliest days those who spoke for society had made his mission plain: to give the sun the hearts of enemies, and to feed the insatiable earth with their bodies. Every lad training in the warrior houses knew that access to the warrior paradise in the House of the Sun was restricted to those who died in either of two ways: on the field of battle, where death was rare, given that the end of combat was the taking of captives, or on the killing stone. That death he had to strive to desire, or at least to embrace. Just as only ritual action made "victory" from the outcome of battles, so for the individual warrior action on the field of battle was consummated only later, and ritually. Behind the desperate excitements of battle lay the shadow of the killing stone, and a lonely death among strangers. This is why the captor, in the

[41] *Florentine Codex*, bk. 2, ch. 21, p. 54.

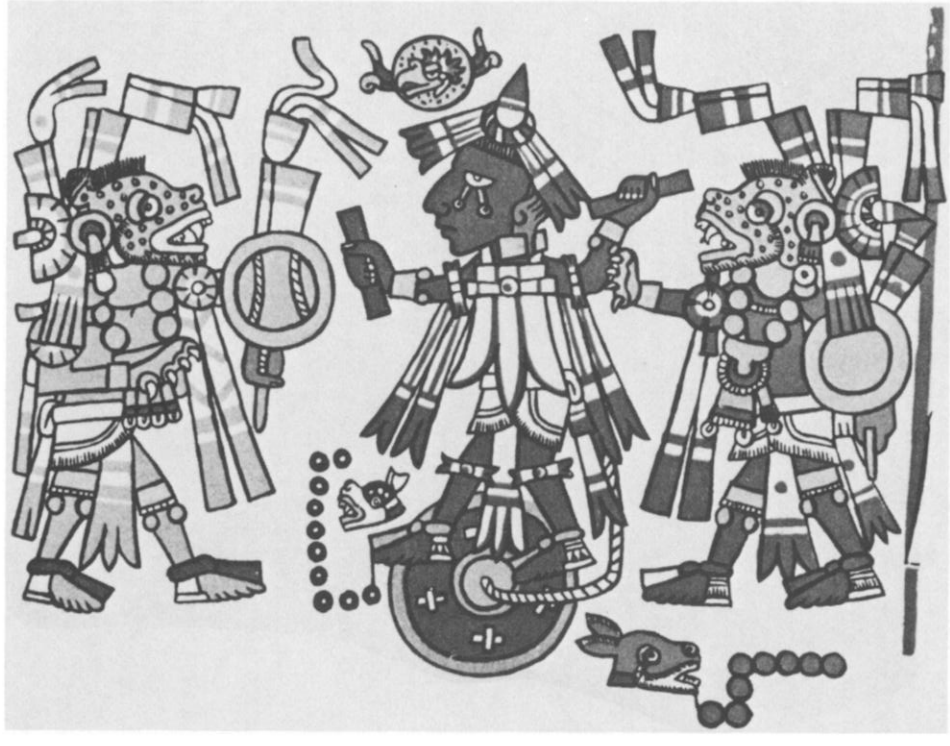
6. Painted skin screenfold portraying death on the killing stone. Codex Zouche-Nuttall (West Oaxaca, pre-conquest), fo. 3: British Library, London, Add. MS. 39671.

midst of the adulation accorded him for having taken a victim for the sun, wore at the cannibal feast of his kin the chalk and down of the victim; why the kin lamented; why he could not eat of what was indeed his "own flesh", for he too, ideally, would die on the stone, and his flesh be eaten in another city. In the rhetoric of Aztec ideology the battlefield was as much a sacred space as the temple precinct — or as much as human confusion and the terrible contingency of war permitted. But it was only on the stone that the meaning of the death could be made manifest.

To be overcome in battle was not fortuitous: it was the sign that the warrior was a warrior no longer, and had begun the transition to victim. From the moment of the seizing of the warrior lock his separation from the ordinary world began. The "rehearsals", as we might cynically call them — the garments changed again and again, the mock combats at the stone, the mock heart excisions — all marked his passage to increased sacredness. Then, with the taking of his warrior lock of hair, "the eagle man was taken upwards" — that is, the warrior made his flight to the sun: before his physical death the individual was extinguished, the transition completed. It was as victim that he watched other men from his city, men he had known when they were alive, fight and die on the stone, until it was his turn for a last display of maximum valour, the exemplary passionate acceptance of his fate. And if he died well his praises would be sung in the warrior houses of his home place.

The attacking Eagle and Jaguar warriors did not aim to disable quickly: a single blow behind knee or ankle would have done that. The aim was rather to exhaust, and to weaken slowly, until the victim "faltered, he fainted . . . he threw himself down as if dead, as if he wished that breath might end, that he might endure it, that he might perish . . .".[42] The performance of the four warriors was a display of high art, of Aztec mastery in weapon handling: an exhibition bout for the gods, for their own warriors, and for the onlookers, who included at Moctezuma's invitation secret watchers from recalcitrant tribes. They sought to demonstrate the superb control of the great warrior, who in the heat of combat, under threat of wounds or capture, or in this case of most painful and public humiliation, and opposed by a warrior at last freed from inhibition, can still inhibit his own stroke to avoid the killing or the crippling blow. And there was the deeper fascination that combat was the most comprehensive

[42] *Ibid.*, bk. 2, ch. 21, p. 53.



7. The gladiatorial combat. Codex Zouche-Nuttall, fo. 83.

metaphor for Aztec understanding of how human society, the world and the cosmos worked. The endless repetitious struggles between the natural elements were endlessly replicated in the ritual ball game, in the mock combats which studded the ritual cycle, and in this most solemn contest on the gladiatorial stone.

The victims were called "the striped ones", and the action on the stone "the striping". What the assailants strove to do was not to club or to stun, but to wound delicately; to slit the skin with an obsidian blade so that blood would spring forth. Xipe, who himself wore a human skin, represented the early spring, when the husk of the seed must be pierced if the sprouting life within is to break through, and when the winter-hardened skin of the earth is pierced by the new growth. Certainly the offerings bestowed on the skin-wearers — the garlands of flowers and the necklaces of maize ears — make the agricultural connection plain. But the most important aspect and the dominant meaning of "the striping" for those who performed and for those who watched was the effusion of warrior blood.

This leads into what are as yet only sketchily chartered waters, but there is a need for speculation if the connections between Aztec warriors and Aztec society are to be searched out. Analysts, especially those working from a class model of society, have proceeded on the assumption that warrior cults were and must have been divorced from those practised by the commoners.[43] (As is clear, I see the warrior as very firmly integrated into the general society, however headily exclusive the highest orders might have been.) Others assume the division on historical grounds: that the warrior cult was imported from the nomadic north, and so came to be practised in parallel with the indigenous rites of the valley farmers.[44] Spaniards and the Europeans who came after them have presented an urban-imperial image of Tenochtitlán, with its splendid hierarchies of priests and warriors and its whole sections of artisans and mechants. But it was a city green with growing things, banked with the *chinampas*, the ingenious system of shallow-water agriculture which had brought the Aztecs their first prosperity. The bulk of the population were not agriculturalists, but those specialist artisans and priests and warriors lived in a vegetable-growers' world, and the centrality of agriculture to their lives could not have been in doubt.

[43] For example, Broda and Carrasco and their associates in the cited works; Johanna Broda de Casas, "Estratificación social y ritual en México", in *Religion in Mesoamerica: XII Round Table* (Mexico, 1972), pp. 179-92.

[44] For example, Warwick Bray, "Civilizing the Aztecs", in J. Friedman and M. J. Rowlands (eds.), *The Evolution of Social Systems* (Pittsburgh, 1978), pp. 373-98.

The *chinampas* required men's exquisite manipulations of earth, seeds, sun and water in an alchemy of vegetable abundance. It was highly precise cultivation, its small stages laid out from when each seed in its individual block of earth, covered against frost, watered by hand, was raised until it was brought to sprout, and then transferred to the only slightly less intensive cultivation of the *chinampa*. The *chinampa* itself was formed by the piling of thick mats of water weed, which provided a fibrous, permeable, and slowly composting base for the rich silt dredged up from the lake bottom. More water could be scooped up at need. Today the few surviving *chinamperos* protect their plants from frost or excessive rain and sun by blankets of straw, or light structures of sticks and mats, and in the sixteenth century the materials, needs and skills were there to do the same.[45]

The Aztec seasonal ritual calendar was geared to the most precisely observed and minutely differentiated stages of vegetable growth. Those stages must have been derived from observation of the "greenhouse" *chinampas*, as they were well in advance of the natural season of the lakeside fields. I would further argue that the *chinampas* not only made Tenochtitlán experientially an agricultural city, and that the plants so raised provided essential ritual equipment — models of what was to come — for ceremonies designed to influence growth in the open fields, but that those highly visible *chinampa* manipulations provided the model for men's part in the natural order, and for their role in aiding the growth of essential foods. In the Feast of the Flaying of Men, when the *chinampa* city turned from the business of war to the growing of things, those manipulations of earth, water, sun and seed through which men found their sustenance were explored through the symbolic medium of the human body, and the interdependence between agriculturalist and warrior set out.

Aztecs called human blood, most particularly human blood deliberately shed, "most precious water".[46] They understood it to be a non-renewable resource, so its value was enhanced. It was thought to

[45] For *chinampa* agriculture, see Michael D. Coe, "The Chinampas of Mexico", in *New World Archeology: Readings from the Scientific American* (San Francisco, 1974), pp. 231-9; Jeffrey Parsons, "The Role of Chinampa Agriculture in the Food Supply of Aztec Tenochtitlán", in Charles E. Cleland (ed.), *Cultural Change and Continuity* (New York, 1976), pp. 233-57.

[46] It is moot whether one should say "deliberately" or "voluntarily" here. Even tribute slaves who went to their deaths as representations of aspects of the deities were in a sense thought of as "volunteers", in that they had submitted to ritual preparation. The warrior's death on the stone or in battle, however little the result of a particular act of choice, was implicit in the vocation of warrior.

have extraordinary fertilizing power. The creation myths, confused and contradictory as they might be on the role of particular "deities", pivot on the creative efficacy of shed blood, as when the great darkness which preceded this Fifth Sun was dispersed only when a little pustular god threw himself into the fire, to be transformed into the Sun. But the Sun only came to move — that is to be alive — when the other gods had spilled their blood, some voluntarily, others unwillingly. A singularly terrifying creation story, and the one most often assumed in Nahuatl texts, tells of the gods Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca gazing down on the great earth monster swimming in the primeval waters. They went down and seized her by her giant limbs, and wrenched her body in half, one part forming the sky, the other the earth. Then the other gods descended, and from her hair they created trees, flowers and herbs; from her skin, grass and flowers; from her eyes, wells, springs and small caverns; from her mouth, rivers and large caves; from her nose mountain valleys; from her shoulders, mountains. This terrible creature cried out in the night and refused to bring forth fruit until she was soaked in human blood and fed with human hearts. When satisfied, she brought forth the plants which provide man's sustenance. It is she who is obsessively represented on the underside of the ritual vessels designed to receive human blood and hearts. Whatever icons they bear on their upper surfaces, whatever great forces they invoke, underneath she is there, her insatiable maw wide open, great claws at elbows and knees, in the squatting position Aztec women adopted to give birth.[47]

So much, for the moment, for blood. Consider now the experience which participation in the gladiatorial ritual brought the captor. The conventional rewards for the warrior were public adulation, the presentation of insignia by the ruler, gifts of capes, flowers, tobacco pipes, which could then be proudly displayed. For many evenings after Xipe's festival young warriors gathered to adorn themselves and to dance before Moctezuma's palace. Sometimes Moctezuma himself, flanked by the other two rulers of the Triple Alliance, came dancing slowly out through the gates to join them: the might of the Aztec empire on display. Later came more exuberant dancing with the women of the city.

From all that festivity the captor was excluded. For all those days

[47] "Histoire du Mechique", ed. Eduard de Jonghe, *Journal de la Société des américanistes*, new ser., ii (1905), pp. 1-42, esp. pp. 28-9; *Codex Chimalpopoca: anales de Cuauhtitlán y leyenda de los soles*, trans. Primo Feliciano Velázquez (Mexico, 1945); *Florentine Codex*, bk. 3, ch. 1; bk. 7, app.

he and his kin were in a state of penance, eating meagrely, prohibited from washing, living secluded from the ordinary pleasures. For those days he was engaged in a different zone. The young man he had captured had been close to him in age, aspirations, prowess. He had tended him through the days before the ceremony, through his unmaking as the warrior, his making as the victim. And he had watched his captive's performance in an agony of identification: it was his own prowess being tested there on the stone. Then came a different intimacy, as he flayed the young body he had known in life and saw youths who sought to participate in his glory clamber into the dank skin. In a society which passionately valued cleanliness and treasured sweet scents, he and his kin had to live in a stench of corruption for the full twenty days. Then, at the end of the period of penance, he struggled for the last time into the crumbling, stinking shroud, to experience its transformation, its slow turning into matter, until, like the pierced casing of the maize seed, it was cast off and sealed away in a cave at the base of Xipe's pyramid, and so returned to the earth.

The explosion of relief which followed the casting off of the skins — the great cleansing and washing, initially with cornmeal to get off the grease, and then a sequence of progressively more playful and rowdy re-enactments of the festival — suggests the strain for those warriors "privileged" to be taken through the ritual glass to confront what lies on the other side of the adulation, the tobacco pipes, the plumes, the grand display. Just as the captive was rehearsed at the stone, so his captor rehearsed through those days his own death and decay; for the transformation of his own flesh into vegetable matter. The Nahuatl word *tonacayotl* means "things of the sun's warmth", that is, the fruits of the earth. It is also used metaphorically to mean "our flesh".[48] When the kin took into their mouths the morsel of human flesh and the stew of dried maize kernels — maize in its least modified form — the lesson they were being taught was that the two substances, perceptually so different, were of the same stuff, although at different points in the cycle. While we transmute bread and wine into flesh and blood, reflecting the centrality of man in our cosmology, they saw human flesh and human blood as transmuted into sacred maize and sacred water. Our "man is dust and will be dust again" focuses on the pathos of the brief reign of the flesh: for them man's flesh has

[48] The most convenient Nahuatl dictionary remains Remi Simeón, *Dictionnaire de la langue nahuatl ou mexicaine* (Graz, 1963). See also Alonso de Molina, *Vocabulario en lengua castellana y mexicana, 1571* (Madrid, 1944 edn.).

been, is and will be again part of the vegetable cycle. (Maize was the only deity always represented in the terms of a natural human biography.) The Flayed Lord Xipe Totec sang of the identity of the tender maize and the warrior flesh it would become:

I am the tender corn
Of jade my heart is made
The gold of rain I'll see
My heart will be refreshed
The fledgling man grow firm
The man of war be born.[49]

The "man of war" was Cinteotl, Young Lord Maize Cob, who would at his harvesting at the end of the agricultural season lead his warriors out to war. (See Plate 8.)

The body of the warrior captive was disassembled with extraordinary care, and allocated very deliberately: the warrior lock to the captor; the heart, the "precious Eagle Cactus fruit", offered to the Sun; the blood to give drink to the Sun and all the stone images, the skin to be worn through all the days of the festival, and then laid away; the flesh to the captor's kin and to Moctezuma; the head skewered on the skull rack. Further, the thighbone, scraped or boiled clean of flesh, was draped with the captive's warrior jacket and victim's heron plume and set up as a sacred object in the courtyard of the captor. Only small parts of that so careful disassembling had to do with the human and social world: the taking of the warrior lock, which spoke of valour and the right to tribute goods, and the setting up of the thighbone as the sacred possession of the captor. It is possible that the bone, along with that other piece of bone the skull, was further associated with the dead warrior's lineage, and more widely with seed in general. Distinguishing bone from flesh mattered to the Aztecs: it was a preoccupation in many ceremonies, and after natural death the bones were separated from the flesh by burning, and then carefully "interred". It is only our predilection which identifies skulls swiftly and exclusively with death: in Mexican painted and carved representations they are insistently associated with fertility beings. The great temple skull racks which so oppressed the Spaniards probably spoke of more than the desire to count coup, while the interred bones of the Aztec dead were offered collective

[49] *Florentine Codex*, bk. 2, app., p. 240.

8. Screenfold, Agave paper, portraying Tlazolteotl, aspect of Tlaltecuhtli, wearing a flayed skin and bringing forth the Maize God. Codex Borbonicus (early 16th cent.), fo. 13: Bibliothèque de l'Assemblée Nationale, Paris, Y120; ed. K. A. Nowotny and J. de Durand-Forest (völlstandige Faks. -Ausg. Komm., Cod. selecti, xliv, Graz, 1974).

commemoration as the forefathers in the domestic ritual of Izcalli, and as paradigm hunters in the festival of Quecholli.[50]

The earliest Nahuatl account we have of the parts of the body is from the Florentine Codex, and is one of the sections of that compilation most heavily marked by European influence and categories. Nonetheless, the descriptions are suggestive. Blood is described as "Our blood, our redness, our liquid, our freshness, our growth, our life blood . . . it wets the flesh, it moistens it like clay, it refreshes it, it reaches the surface . . . it strengthens one . . . one is greatly strengthened . . .". Blood vessels are likened to reeds. The analogies between the movement of blood through the flesh and that of water through the earth are vivid. The description of the heart relates it closely to the sun: it is "round, hot, that by which there is existence. It makes one live . . .".[51] Unhappily for my case there is no general account given of bone, and in the specific references to particular bones no association with seed. However, myth lends some support to the identification. After this Fifth World had been made, Quetzalcoatl went down into the underworld to beg the bones of the men of an earlier creation from the lord of Mictlán. Initially the ruler agreed, but as Quetzalcoatl gathered them up the Death Lord changed his mind and sent orders that Quetzalcoatl be stopped. In his hurry to get away Quetzalcoatl dropped the bones, but he snatched up the broken fragments and made his escape. Cihuacoatl, an aspect of Earth Mother, ground the bones like maize kernels on her grinding stone. The gods then moistened them with blood drawn from their penises, and from the soft dough so formed man and woman emerged.

What we have in that careful analysis of the human body, an analysis at once physical and conceptual, is the setting out in terms of its components of those elements the Aztecs saw as being manipu-

[50] Jill Furst, in her penetrating commentary on a Mixtec codex, notes the skull/fertility connection, and explores the possibility that bone was understood as seed. Jill Leslie Furst, *Codex Vindobonensis Mexicanus, i: A Commentary* (The Vienna Codex) (Albany, N.Y., 1978). For the maize-flesh transformation, see Willard Gingerich, "Tlaloc, His Song", *Latin American Indian Literatures*, i no. 2 (1977), pp. 79-88. To pursue these connections fully would involve the reconstruction of Aztec understandings of the processes of human and vegetable reproduction. Alfredo López Austin, *Cuerpo humano e ideología: las concepciones de los antiguos náhuas*, 2 vols. (Mexico, 1980), provides relevant information and superb scholarly exposition, focusing on Aztec understandings of the mind-body problem. For the Izcalli offerings, see *Florentine Codex*, bk. 2, p. 167; for Quecholli, see *ibid.*, pp. 135-6.

[51] *Florentine Codex*, bk. 10, ch. 27, pp. 128, 130-2. For an analysis of the material relating to the body and disease collected by Sahagún, see Alfredo López Austin, "Sahagún's Work and the Medicine of the Ancient Nahuas: Possibilities for Study", in Edmonson (ed.), *Sixteenth-Century Mexico*, pp. 205-24.

lated in *chinampa* agriculture, and which they identified as those which made up the world: human flesh being equated with maize, vegetable foods and the earth itself; human blood with rain and flowing water; the human heart with the sun's heat; and (this less confidently) human bone with seed. Note that this analysis was performed upon the body of a great warrior. While the same essential understanding must have informed all accounts of the relationship between the human and the natural order, the Aztecs, specialists in warfare, chose to render it most explicit when dramatizing the unobvious but crucial connection between the feats of warriors and the food of men.

Notions of an afterlife have their place here. Aztecs understood that men who died by water-related accident or disease returned to a springtime world with Tlaloc, He who Makes Things Sprout, and who manifests himself in rain and the mountains. (Tlaloc's chosen ones were, atypically, buried without preliminary burning.) Babies who died so young that they had not been committed to this world were buried by the grain bins, and thought to have returned, still unblemished, from whence they came. Those who died in battle (including women dead in childbirth) and those who died on the killing stone went to a warrior paradise. And all others, regardless of rank, travelled for four bitter and bleak years through the increasingly chill nine layers of the underworld until they arrived at the lowest level, presented their gifts to the Death Lord, and dissolved into Nothingness — or, rather, into Everything, for "there is our common home, there is our common place of perishing; there, there is an enlarging of the earth where forever it [the individual life] hath ended . . .".[52] After that four-year journey, the "person" had quite gone. For all of the four years kin made offerings of garments and equipment to ease the pains of the journey: the journey completed and the four years passed, the ceremonies ceased.[53]

It is often said that those who died a warrior's death, in battle or on the stone, escaped this general annihilation of self. It is true that in the course of a moving prayer addressed to the dangerous god Tezcatlipoca, warriors are said to "attain the Sun . . . the turquoise prince", and there to live "forever": there always, "forever, perpetually, time without end, they rejoice, they live in abundance, where they suck the different flowers . . .".[54] That emphasis on the perma-

[52] *Florentine Codex*, bk. 3, app., ch. 1, p. 41.
[53] *Ibid.*, p. 44.
[54] *Ibid.*, bk. 6, ch. 3, p. 13.

nence of their tenure in the warrior paradise is unusual: much more frequently we are told that the warrior reward was to spend the four years of transition in attendance on the Sun, shouting, singing, displaying — the joys of the warrior house — as they escorted him from his dawning to the zenith, and basked in his warmth. (From the zenith to the west his escort was provided by the Women Warriors, a very much more sinister group.) Then, after four years, "they changed into precious birds; hummingbirds, orioles, yellow birds . . . chalky butterflies, featherdown butterflies; they sucked the honey from the flowers there where they dwelt. And here upon earth they came to suck honey from the various flowers . . .".[55] There is no suggestion in either case that their awareness was continuous with that of this world; rather, "they lived drunk . . . not knowing, no longer remembering, the affairs of the day, the affairs of the night". Generalized warriors had become generalized birds and butterflies, dancing endlessly, anonymously, without memory in the sun. They enjoyed no dispensation from that final dissolution of self.

There was nothing "personal" in the relationship between men and those powers which, for want of a better term, we call by the altogether misleading word "gods". The first Spanish friars unsurprisingly thought in terms of pantheons when faced with the astonishing array of names and images which were paid reverence by the natives. Generations of iconographers and historians of religion spent years in the construction of ingenious theologies to bring order to what seemed a shimmering mist of the sacred. But now there is a growing consensus that what Aztecs meant by all these names and images was the invocation of different aspects of relatively few great natural forces or principles, and a commentary on the relationships between them — as when Earth was addressed as Our Grandmother, Mother of the Sacred Ones, She who Eats our Filth, Heart of the Earth, Mother of our Sustenance, and so on. Aztec sculpture (like the Aztec language and like the construction of ritual objects) exhibits the same compiling mode whereby icons, most of them sturdily naturalistic representations of hearts, flowers, skulls, serpents, are compiled into remarkably abstract commentaries on the nature of things: a kind of metaphysical poetry in stone.

The great forces thus invoked and reflected upon had no engagement with man, with one exception. The exception was Tezcatlipoca, invoked as the Night Wind, the Enemy on Both Sides, the Youth,

[55] *Ibid.*, bk. 3, app., ch. 1, p. 49.

the Lord of the Close Vicinity. He was arbitrary, the personification of capricious power, coming among men from time to time to wreak casual havoc and dispense casual rewards. He was associated with sorcerers, who injure men wantonly and by stealth, and with the jaguar, with its superb annihilating power. He was also the deity associated with human rulership. Neither with him, nor with the more abstract natural elements, was there any hint of a contract. There was instead a key word in Nahuatl, *tequitl*, which can be roughly translated as "debt", "levy" or "tribute", but carrying with it a strong implication of what we might call "vocation", being applied to the whole-hearted performance of one's obligatory occupation in the world. It was used most insistently, however, to describe the offerings made of one's own blood, in the routine daily offerings, or on the battlefield or the killing stone. Only in those two places did the individual wholly and completely pay his or her "debt". But all forms of the payment were penitential, and some grievously so. In a great warrior festival midway through the season of war, a representation of Huitzilopochtli was moulded out of a rich dough of maize and seeds (its "bones", by the way, being separately constructed). It was killed by a blow to its vegetable heart in the presence of all the military chiefs, and the heart presented to the ruler. Each year the body was divided in rotation between the paired warrior houses in Tenochtitlán and the sister but subordinate city of Tlatelolco. All the members of the two warrior houses ate a fragment of the dough. The ingestion initiated a year of such strenuous penance and obligation that men were driven to pawn their land or their labour, or even to seek a once-for-all settlement of their "debt" through death in battle rather than endure it to the end.[56]

To eat the flesh of Huitzilopochtli was a heavy thing. Thus the young warriors began to learn the lesson — a lesson only to be learnt in the ritual zone, not on the field of battle — of what it was to be a warrior. The lesson took time to learn, and had been learnt best by those who had risen to eminence and so, for example, had had the dark experience of offering a captive at the gladiatorial stone. The rough exuberance of the warrior youth gave way to sedate melancholy for those who knew how fleeting were the pleasures of this life, its riches, its public acclaim, and how heavy the burden of humanity.

The tempo and dramatic structuring of the ritual at the gladiatorial stone, as of many other Aztec rituals, reiterated the same understand-

[56] *Ibid.*, pp. 6-9.

ing. We are used to thinking of ritual as fully scripted, so releasing men from distracting nervousness. Victor Turner has borrowed the notion of "flow" from the psychologist Mihali Cjikszentimhalyi to bring this quality into focus. Cjikszentimhalyi identifies flow as "the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement"; "the state in which action follows action according to an internal logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part", as when a game's rules exclude from the skilled players' awareness as irrelevant most of the "noises" which make up our daily reality. The rules simplify and focus, and above all facilitate the experience of intense but harmonious and fluent action. Turner sees an equivalent "flow" experience as being achieved in ritual where, with self-consciousness reduced through drugs, vigil, chants or fasting, action and awareness fuse as attention centres on a limited stimulus field, so that only the "now" matters.[57] This is interesting in that it is an accurate description of the situation of a number of the protagonists in this ritual, above all of the victim who is scripted to the end. But for others — the attacking warriors, the anxious captor — insecurity is scripted in; the risk that the flow will be interrupted, and the airy structures of the "really real" collapse. The Aztecs characterized their universe as composed of heavens above and underworlds below this seen world, those heavens and underworlds being stable and enduring. This layer, Tlalticpactli, "on earth", the layer manifest to the senses, they characterized as chronically unstable, and called it "that which changes". That understanding of the fragility of the perceived world, and of human arrangements within it, could be dramatized by making human statuses uncertain: the triumphant warrior does not display his status as his captive fights there on the stone; he strives to achieve it afresh. That constant challenge and testing structured all the hierarchies.

The deliberate insertion into ritual of the problematical and the unpredictable, like the capriciousness attributed to the sole interventionist god Tezcatlipoca, spoke of the uncertainty of the things of this world. Ephemerality made those things the more treasured. Aztec "lyric poetry" strikes an easy and mistaken response from the European reader, with its pretty imagery of falling flowers and misty patios (in Aztec reality, images of death on the stone). But the elegiac "where have all the flowers gone?" note is correctly recognized. Only

[57] Victor Turner, "Variations on a Theme of Liminality", in Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff (eds.), *Secular Ritual* (Amsterdam, 1977), pp. 36-52.

9. Aztec stone relief of Tlaltecuhtli, the Earth Lord, found in the Templo Mayor precinct of Mexico-Tenochtitlán (note the fanged jaws at knees and elbows, and the sacrificial knife "tongue"): Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico.

briefly were men warmed by the sun in this world, between the dark and the dark. The particular beauties which most profoundly moved them — the shimmer of feathers, the shaped sounds of a chanted poem, the scent of a flower, the translucence of fragile jade — were moving precisely because they were as ephemeral as the lives of men.[58]

"Courage", in such a context, becomes a complex notion. There seem to have been two kinds of bravery recognized in the Aztec fighting man which, although touched by the connotations of class, were far from exhausted by them. One was the attribute of those warriors like the "shorn ones" or the "shaven-headed Otomi" who hurled themselves heedlessly into the fray. Such men were richly rewarded and highly valued.[59] But they were not accorded positions of authority, nor unqualified social approval. In one of the great homilies in which a father instructs his son in correct and controlled social demeanour, the "so-called furious in war" who goes "foolishly" encountering his death is classified along with the clown and buffoon as one who understands nothing and lives for vanities and acclaim.[60] He knows no fear because he has no knowledge. Admiration is reserved for the warrior who is morally informed; who understands his obligation. He will go humbly and quietly in this world, watchful, prudent; but when the Earth Lord Tlaltecuhtli stirs, "openeth his mouth, parteth his lips", when the flame of war is kindled, he will be ready. (See Plate 9.) The same great prayer to Tezcatlipoca which acknowledges the anguish of the bereaved kinsfolk also acknowledges the anguish of the true warriors, "those who suffer pain, who suffer torment in their hearts" and ask that they be given their only release, their only ease — the final encounter with Tezcatlipoca:

> Show him the marvel. May his heart not falter in fear. May he desire, may he long for the flowery death by the obsidian knife. May he savor the scent, savor the freshness, savor the sweetness of the darkness . . .
> Take his part. Be his friend.[61]

And this to the "Enemy on Both Sides".

When we hear an official rhetoric of acute self-control, and watch

[58] For the songs, see *Poesía náhuatl*, ed. Angél Maria Garibay K[intana], 3 vols. (Mexico, 1964-8). Excellent translations of some of the songs are to be found in Miguel Leon-Portilla (ed.), *Native Mesoamerican Spirituality* (New York and Toronto, 1980). The sacred songs are in *Florentine Codex*, bk. 2, app.; the "Prayers to Tezcatlipoca" and the great song to Tlaloc are in bk. 6, chs. 1-9.

[59] *Florentine Codex*, bk. 10, ch. 6, pp. 23-4.

[60] *Ibid.*, bk. 6, ch. 22, p. 123.

[61] *Ibid.*, bk. 6, ch. 3, pp. 11-14.

scenes of extraordinary public violence, we are not confronting some unresolved social dilemma of how to enjoy the profits of military expansion without having to bear with socially disruptive warriors. Aztec rhetoric and Aztec ritual were unified in the endeavour to sustain a social order sufficiently in harmony with the natural order to survive within it. To describe as "violence" the deliberate sequence of bloody acts which we see brought into the frame and focus of ritual action is to assume that their point lay in their destructiveness. But the crucial understandings which grounded those killings and slow dismemberings were that human flesh and maize — "maize" as metonym for all vegetable sustenance — were the same matter in different transformations; that the transformations were cyclic, and the cycles constantly in jeopardy; and that men's actions played a part recognized as small but, given the delicacy of the balance, always potentially decisive in maintaining the sequence of those transformations, and so men's slight purchase on existence.

They were bleak understandings, reducing man to object, and declaring human society to be peripheral, important only to itself. It took courage enough, and long years of training, to accept them.

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