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Part IV-B

Social Relations

Chapter 26

Gender and Aztec Life Cycles

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The image of the Aztecs in the popular imagination is dominated by men. Brutal warriors, glorious kings, and bloody priests stalk across the pages of both history and fiction, reinforcing their masculinity through ruthless displays of violence, and asserting their dominance through the spectacles of warfare and sacrifice. Thanks to a strongly military public culture, often centered on the performance of "masculine" ideals and behaviors, it is easy to see why some scholars have argued that Tenochtitlan in particular was based on a social structure that "glorified the cult of male dominance" (Nash 1978:359), and for many years it was taken for granted that Aztec society was a stereotypical military patriarchy: active warrior men contrasting sharply with their domestic, subordinated wives. In reality, however, women in Aztec culture were powerful and effective figures, possessing tangible rights and responsibilities, and clearly recognized as indispensable to society's collective success.

Patriarchy, Complementarity, or Fluidity?

Although popular perceptions of the Aztecs often retain a rather monolithic view of male dominance, it is now relatively rare in specialist texts (although there are some exceptions, e.g., Rodríguez-Shadow 1991). In recent years, the view of Aztec culture as a strongly patriarchal society has largely been replaced by what might be broadly seen as

two alternative approaches to Aztec gender. The first, and most prevalent, approach is gender parallelism, which sees society as based on a complementary duality in which men and women possessed separate, complementary roles that were regarded as completely different but of equal value (Clendinnen 1991; Kellogg 1997). Alongside this model is a more fluid approach rooted in the belief that the Aztecs saw gender as an unstable and flexible category that required close supervision and control (Klein 2001). Whether they think it was motivated by a belief in innate gender roles or a need to control and stabilize gendered behavior, however, scholars now largely agree that male and female roles were primarily arranged into a binary system, each with its own separate spheres of responsibility and activity.

In a practical sense, Aztec gender systems appear to have combined parallelism with a degree of hierarchy, and it is probably more accurate to say that male and female roles were structurally "equivalent" rather than "equal." Men controlled most of the roles that are seen as traditional markers of influence, dominating politics, warfare, priesthood, and officialdom, but female rights were tangible in Aztec culture. Women held positions of influence not only as healers, midwives, matchmakers, teachers, and priestesses but also as leaders and administrators in their districts, as craftspeople, merchants, and marketplace overseers (responsible for good conduct of trade, pricing, assigning tributes, and provisioning the army). Power and property passed through both male and female lines to children of both genders, and all adult women were full "citizens" before the law; they were legal individuals, not dependents, entitled to appeal directly to the courts, own property, and initiate divorce proceedings. In Tenochtitlan, women also seem to have been relieved of the sole burden of childcare, which has often historically dictated female

existence, and the raising of children was a shared responsibility. From an early age, both boys and girls were expected to contribute to their households, and the belief that the contribution of every citizen was vital to success permeated Aztec society and shaped their experience; everyone had their role, whether it be as ruler, worker, warrior, or mother, and all were essential. Energy and effectiveness were expected of women, just as they were expected of men.

The Problem of Sources

One of the biggest challenges for an Aztec historian lies in extricating the reality of people's gender experience from the ideal. Although this is a perennial problem for gender historians, our view is more than usually obscured by the patchy and problematic nature of the evidence. The documentary sources for Aztec culture are, of course, inherently problematic due to their post-conquest production, but on questions of gender these issues are even more pronounced. Not only did Spanish-Catholic authors tend to favor male perspectives and shape information to reflect their own expectations, but the production of texts (and even, according to some authors, the entire culture of alphabetic literacy) was also heavily male-dominated. Although there were some female informants, their perspectives were filtered through a process of recording and editing that was exclusively male. This introduces not only misunderstandings and errors (of both omission and commission) but also the deliberate possibility of "regularization": a strategic attempt by the indigenous people to promote their own cause by appealing to the values of the dominant group (Bourdieu 1977). In gendered terms, this would likely lead to a portrayal of Aztec women as conforming more closely to Judeo-Christian feminine ideals of modesty and deference.

Perhaps more than for any other subject, our view of Aztec gender is profoundly colored by the idiosyncrasies of colonial observers, not least in the sources' failure to speak to certain subjects: in a society so obsessed with blood, it is profoundly frustrating that we cannot access their attitudes toward menstruation, for example. We must remain constantly alert to the possibility of colonial imposition, misunderstanding, or omission, but, fascinatingly, despite the inevitable corruptions and misreadings, the picture of indigenous gender relationships that emerges from the sixteenth-century sources is one that remains remarkably resistant to Spanish stereotyping. Women appear as able, active, and articulate, partners and full participants in Aztec society. This impression is furthered by scrutiny of pictorial sources and material culture. In the *Florentine Codex*, for example, women are depicted engaging in a much greater diversity of ceremonial roles than are elaborated in the text (Brown 1985). Archaeology can also provide an important corrective to the focus on Tenochtitlan that typifies most of the textual evidence (Brumfiel 1991). It is reasonable to assume a significant degree of diversity across the Basin of Mexico, but it is much harder to identify institutions and practices outside of the major urban centers, where ethnohistorical and archaeological evidence is concentrated. Despite their weaknesses, any attempt to access daily life in Aztec culture will inevitably return to the colonial documents, as they are the most detailed available records for individuals' experience; however, there were variations in practice not only within the city but also beyond. Certainly the sources, often originating with informants looking back through blurred or rose-tinted glasses, tend to create an idealized and collective image of Aztec people, giving us little sense of the distinctiveness of individual experience: women behave in one way and men in another. Only rarely do exceptional or

unique characters, such as the fascinating *patlaches* (hermaphrodites) or *cuiloni* (effeminates), peek out of the past to disrupt the harmonious ideal (Sigal 2007).

Life Cycles

Gender was imprinted from birth in Aztec culture. For a boy, his warrior destiny was marked by the gift of model weapons and the burial of his umbilical cord on the battlefield. If the baby was a girl, a broom and weaving implements were pressed into her tiny hands and her ties to the home cemented by the interment of her umbilical cord by the grinding stone (Figure 26.1). This appears to be a powerful physical expression of the sixteenth-century *Florentine Codex*'s claim that the man was to "issue forth in war in all parts," while "the woman was to go nowhere" (Sahagún 1969, Book VIIV). This stark division fails to capture the complexity of Aztec life, but it does evoke very effectively the gendered binary that shaped individual and collective existence from an early age.

Insert Figure 26.1 here.

Once a baby was weaned and no longer dependent on its mother, childcare and basic skills training also seems to have been gendered, with fathers principally responsible for their sons and mothers for their daughters (Figure 26.2) (Berdan and Anawalt 1992). This system reinforced gender roles, as well as providing a practical way to teach children the skills and responsibilities appropriate to their sex, a duality that was continued in formal education. Tenochtitlan possessed a universal education system, but young men were subject to more institutional occupational training, attending either the residential *telpochcalli* (warrior school) or *calmecac* (priestly school), while young women principally learned their trades and household responsibilities at home or in their communities. During puberty, however, boys and girls learned history, philosophy, and

religion together in the *cuicacalli* (house of song), providing a rare opportunity to dance, mix, and maybe even socialize with teenagers of the opposite sex.

Insert Figure 26.2 here.

The age at which young men and women were seen to mature and start thinking of marriage is obscure but seems to have been younger for women, probably in their early teens. Men were expected to finish their training before moving out of the warrior house into "the company of women" in their late teens or early twenties (Sahagún 1969, Book VI; Smith 2012). Although experiences were far from uniform, marriage was the norm for the majority of Aztecs (with the exception of priests, who were required to remain celibate) and formed the basis for social structures and expectations. When a young man (or perhaps his parents) decided that he was ready to marry, his mother and father consulted family and community leaders to find an appropriate bride. Orchestrated by an elderly female matchmaker, the match was agreed between the two families, with the assumption that the wife would join the husband's household. The extent to which the couple's wishes were considered is difficult to tell, but (although dynastic considerations presumably prevailed at the higher echelons of society) the sources imply that personal preferences were also taken into account.

Marriage marked the moment of an Aztec's entry into full adulthood and community membership, and the *calpulli* ensured that every young couple had sufficient resources to set up their own household and engage fully in the life of the district. The wife controlled the household "finances," trading in the marketplace, grinding, cooking, cleaning, and supplying the home, as well as producing the cotton cloth, which was a valuable medium of exchange. Weaving was central to Aztec women's identity as well as their economic independence. Imagery and archaeology suggest that spindle whorls and

weaving battens performed for women an equivalent function to shields and swords in male culture: sites for the expression of geographical, tribal, and individual identity (McCafferty and McCafferty 1991). The husband's responsibilities clearly included military service, hunting, fishing, and farming, as well as representing his household in what we might call local politics, but the division of duties becomes much less clear-cut when we look at trades. Although artisans are most often depicted as male, some sources also suggest that women participated in skilled crafts such as writing (Figure 26.3), lapidary design, and featherwork, and these seem likely to have been family or local specialisms. Only men were traveling merchants, but both men and women were traders, as well as marketplace overseers, healers, teachers (of their own sex), and local officials.

Insert Fig 26.3 here.

In a subsistence and barter economy, women's roles as producers of both food and goods for exchange were highly valued, lending them respect and concrete influence. The perception that both male and female contributions were required for productivity is borne out by the fact that marriage was the moment at which a young man was officially inscribed into the registers of the community and became liable to its full social, economic, and political obligations (Zorita 1965). Women's economic activities were vital to society and, coupled with their ability to hold property, presumably secured them a degree of independence from their husbands. Polygyny was practiced among the nobility, however, and it seems likely women were seen as less important in elite society except for their reproductive function and as a tool to cement dynastic alliances. The practical extent of polygyny (except among *tlatoque*) is unclear, however, and a distinction seems to have been made between "legal" and "primary" wives and those of lesser status, with some partners likened more to "concubines" (Read and Rosenthal

2006). The importance of women's productive function was clearly recognized at all levels, however, with the acquisition of wealth through weaving even being posited as a possible motivation for polygyny, a structure that, although traditionally seen as diminishing women's status, could also arguably provide women with practical (and even emotional) support networks (Townsend 2006). Occasional references to *cihuatlatoque* ("female rulers," sing. *cihuatlatoani*) make clear that some noblewomen were able to wield significant political authority; inheritance passed through both male and female lines, and the royal origins of the Tenochca dynasty lie with a woman, Illancueitl (Kellogg 1995).

As the most obvious example of gender complementarity, marriage demonstrates the perceived importance of both male and female activities for collective success. Even in conceiving a child, continued intercourse was believed to be necessary so that the couple could jointly "grow" the baby. (At least up to a point—beyond a certain time, "excessive" coupling would apparently produce a sticky, oversized child!) A microcosm of Aztec society, this most fundamental gendered pairing exemplifies patterns of parallelism that are seen not only in kinship but also throughout the social, political, and religious world.

Symbolism, Religion, and Myth

Gendered pairings are seen at every level of Aztec life and belief, and parallelism profoundly influenced both structures and ideals. Both gods and goddesses appear prominently in Aztec mythology, and it is common to see deities appearing in either male/female pairings or, in many cases, with both male and female aspects. The duality of the creation of the universe is seen in the supreme originating deities Ometecuhtli and

Omecihuatl. One rather pragmatic explanation of this primordial couple translates their names as “Bone Lord” and “Bone Woman” in reference to the creation of humanity from bones of a previous era, but the duality of their gendered identity is made even more explicit in the argument that sees them as “Two Lord” and “Two Woman,” masculine and feminine aspects of Ometeotl (“Two God” or “Lord of Duality”) (León-Portilla 1999). Whichever interpretation we favor, both male and female influence was clearly regarded as indispensable in creation, as it was in destruction; at the other end of the cycle, Mictlan, the land of the dead, was ruled over by Mictlantecuhtli and Mictlancihuatl, the lord and lady of the realm of deceased souls.

In the physical realm, Tenochtitlan was headed by the “omnipotent dyad” (Schroeder 1997) of the *tlatoani* (“he who speaks”) and *cihuacoatl* (“woman snake”); although both were physically male, as the name makes explicit, the *cihuacoatl* was metaphorically female and, on ceremonial occasions, was dressed in female attire, literally personifying his eponymous goddess. Although the power dynamics between the two rulers are a little hazy (perhaps due to Spanish misunderstanding or to shifts in the latter years of empire) it seems that, much like a married couple, the *tlatoani* and *cihuacoatl* each held discrete, gendered responsibilities. Broadly speaking, the *tlatoani* was responsible for politically “external” matters such as warfare, diplomacy, state religion, and national politics, while the *cihuacoatl* held more “domestic” (in the political, internal, sense) responsibilities, maintaining order in the city, and acting as principal judge, as well as governing the city when the *tlatoani* was on military campaigns (Read 2000). High political office was ordinarily reserved to men, but this

symbol of female influence at the apex of authority is symptomatic of the gendered parallelism that shaped Aztec experience.

Just as a husband and wife shared the duties essential to the success of their household, so the state flourished through the corresponding endeavors of its ruling partnership: "One could see the Mexica house as a model of the cosmos, writ small, but perhaps it would be better to see the Mexica cosmos as a house writ large" (Burkhart 1997:30-1). While women maintained and controlled the "domestic" sphere (a term that, in a society of extended kin groups, should be understood as encompassing the community more widely, not limited to nuclear family units), men were more "outward-facing," taking on the "public" responsibilities such as warfare and politics. The same pattern can be observed in priestly duties, where male priests were solely responsible for human sacrificial ritual and public discourse, while *cihuatlamacazque* ("women priests") maintained and supplied the temple, as well as taking part in silent devotions in public.

This public/domestic dichotomy, as well as the dominance of men in traditional spheres of influence, perhaps tempts us to identify traditional patterns of patriarchy at work, but such assumptions are challenged by the respect for women, and their contribution, which is visible in Aztec culture and behavior. It is only by looking to the cosmological underpinnings of Aztec ideals that we can illuminate the origins of their distinctive gendered interactions.

Male and female roles were strongly shaped by the Aztecs' profound bond with the gods and their mythical past. During childbirth, women were believed to be literally possessed by the goddess Cihuacoatl (the same deity who was personified by one of the ruling dyad). One of the aspects of the Earth Goddess, whose power was so awesome that

even to be in her presence was considered perilous, Cihuacoatl gave women a physical connection to the spiritual world that offered them access to forces both awesome and perilous. A woman who died during childbirth remained permanently imbued with the presence of the goddess, and her corpse had to be guarded from the predations of young warriors who hoped that carrying her finger or arm into battle might allow them to draw on Cihuacoatl's power. This physical embodiment of divine power also elevated the deceased woman's spirit to godly status; she became one of the Cihuateteo ("Woman Gods") (Figure 26.4) who haunted the crossroads and promised to transform into the Tzitzimime ("Devil Women") who would devour humanity at the end of the Fifth Age.

Insert Figure 26.4

While male roles in religion were diverse and functional, rooted in the necessity to provide blood to the gods in exchange for the blood let by male deities to bring about their own birth, women's religious significance was narrowly identified and awe-inspiring. Men served the gods; women embodied them (Dodds Pennock 2008).

Warfare

It has been argued that women's authority was gradually diminished by the increasing focus on military issues associated with the Aztecs' rise to political prominence in central Mexico. The increasing reliance on tribute and the spoils of war, both channels of wealth controlled by men, arguably marginalized women and domestic activities, establishing warfare as the principal route to social mobility and success (Nash 1978). While the increasing emergence of a social structure based on military hierarchy undoubtedly threatened to erode the perceived importance of the female "domestic" sphere, it is important to recognize that military success was seen as a collective responsibility.

Although the battlefield itself was a male domain, warfare was central to the lives of all Aztecs, both men and women (Burkhart 1997). Women were honored in military language as the mothers of future warriors, heralded for carrying "the small shield" and "capturing" a baby; the afterlife of a woman who died in childbirth parallels that of a man who died in battle or as a sacrifice. Possessing a direct conduit to the divine, women engaged in symbolic struggles that were believed to have concrete consequences on the battlefield: a wife who carelessly allowed food to stick to the pot could cause her husband's arrow to miss his mark (Sahagún 1979, Book V). Triumph in war was dependent on women's diligent performance of domestic rituals and prayers, which preserved the safety of their menfolk, as well as their practical responsibilities for sustaining the city and provisioning the army. Although women physically fought only in the most dire circumstances, they were seen as strong, effective, and independent partners in the most fundamental of Aztec activities: the practice of war.

So central was the Aztec emphasis on individuals' value and effectiveness in their designated roles that gender distinctions appear to have been lessened in old age. Past their prime as warriors, mothers, and workers, old men and women saw their significance pass away, as the specific values of their sexes became less relevant to their daily experience. These elders were respected as models for behavior, as ancestors, and as guardians of tradition, but, with the passing of their vitality, so masculinity and femininity too seem to have been diminished. An old woman might remain a homemaker, an old man a political advisor, but their gender identities ebbed along with their fertility and energy, until they blurred into the "forefathers, the old men, the old women, the

white haired ones" who watched over the words "to live by" which guided the next generation (Sahagún 1969, Book VI).

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