Children of the Aztecs

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The society of the Aztecs is often associated with its sacrificial and warrior-like aspects. However, many people would perhaps be surprised at the loving relationship Aztec parents had with their children. This relationship began before birth and continued throughout life. The best description we have of parents and children in Aztec society are the pictographs that have been included in the *Codex Mendoza*.[1] This was a manuscript compiled at the request of the first Spanish viceroy in New Spain, Antonio de Mendoza. Sacrifice was an inherent part of Aztec society and did at times include the sacrifice of children. This paper will focus on the relationship between parents and children, and the various rituals, including those of sacrifice, that were a part of the Aztec life cycle.

To understand the relationship between parent and child, it is important to remember that in Aztec society infants were seen as a raw material in need of formation into a specific form. The raw materials that adults associated with children were many times maize or jewels. Throughout one's life, the refinement and development of a child continued with various lifecycle rituals. From birth to death, rituals and ceremonies enabled a person to grow with both human and divine help. Rituals, in fact, began before a child was born.

From the moment a woman was found to be pregnant, the families of both mother and father commemorated the good news. A celebration took place in which the families and the important elders of the area gathered to celebrate the upcoming birth. After a feast, there would be many speeches, beginning with the most important elder. Deceased ancestors would be called upon to protect mother and child. Each person at the celebration spoke; many times reminding the woman that the child she was carrying was a gift from the gods. The expectant mother was the last to speak, and she thanked all those who had come, and stated publicly the happiness that the pregnancy had brought to her. However, she also expressed

[1] Frances F. Berdan and Patricia R. Anawalt editors, *The Codex Mendoza* (Berkeley; University of California Press, 1992).

her anxiety that she was not worthy of such happiness.[2] This dialogue of happiness, yet apprehension, is apparent throughout much of Aztec society.

At the time of birth, a midwife was in attendance. The midwife was a woman who was very well respected in the community. There is evidence that she was a fairly prosperous member of the Aztec culture, given her role as the one who helped bring new life into the world.[3] The mother was looked upon as a brave warrior and the midwife chanted a cry of victory immediately after the baby was born:

> My youngest one! …Perhaps thou wilt live for a little while! Art thou our reward? Art thou our merit?... Or perhaps also thou wert born without desert, without merit: perhaps thou hast been born as a little smutty ear of maize. Perhaps filth, corruption are thy desert, thy merit. Perhaps thou wilt steal…[T]here will be work, labor, for daily sustenance….
> …May the lord of the near, of the nigh [who] is thy mother, thy father, they revered parent, cherish thee, array thee….[4]

This verse relates how blessed the newborn was to be brought into the world. Yet the midwife's words clearly warn the child that there will be insecurity and grief throughout life. If the mother delivered twins, one of the babies was killed at birth, as twins were feared to be an earthly threat to their parents in Aztec society.[5]

A woman who died in childbirth was regarded in the same esteem as a warrior, as each had sacrificed their life so that a new life could be born. The Aztec cosmology is a subject unto itself, however in this regard it was believed that a woman who died while giving birth was to have taken from male warriors the all powerful sun at noon, where it could then be brought back to the earth by sunset.[6] The soul ascended to the female side of heaven, or western side of the world, emerging at times to haunt those that lived. A woman who died in childbirth was given a lavish burial. She was

[2] Jacques Soustelle, *The Daily Life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962), 187-8.

[3] Ibid., 56.

[4] Kay Read, "The Fleeting Moment: Cosmology, Eschatology, and Ethics in Aztec Religion and Society," *Journal of Religious Ethics* Spring (1986): 113-39.

[5] Karl Taube, *Aztec and Maya Myths* (Britain: British Museum Press, 1993), 16.

[6] Kay Read, *Time and Sacrifice in the Aztec Cosmos* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1998), 133.

cleansed and dressed in her finest garments. Her husband then carried the woman on his back to the place of burial. The elderly women of the community gave cries like that of warriors on the path to the burial sight, in an attempt to protect the body. It was believed that the body of a woman who died in childbirth was divine. Therefore young men would try to cut off a finger or the hair of the deceased woman. If they succeeded, these accoutrements were placed on the young men's' shields during battle to give them courage and valor. The woman's remains were buried at sunset. It would be guarded for four nights in an attempt to protect anyone from stealing the body.[7]

Four days after the birth of a child, the midwife came again, this time for a ritualistic cleansing and naming ceremony. The baby was brought into a courtyard where many formal procedures were performed. The midwife breathed upon the water, and then gently bathed the child, saying:

> My youngest one, my beloved youth…Enter, descend into the blue water, the yellow water…Approach thy mother Chalchiuhtlicue, Chalchiuhtlatonac! May she receive thee…May she cleanse thy heart; may she make it fine, good. May she give thee fine, good conduct!"[8]

The midwife placed a symbol for what the child would become into the baby's hands. If a boy, a shield and arrows would be placed in his hands signifying that he would become a warrior. Other objects scattered about were a loincloth and cape. For a baby girl, objects included a broom, spindle, bowl, skirt, and shift. These were much-needed items in a female's life, as the ritual of sweeping was important in Aztec culture. Therefore, the gender differences began immediately after birth. After the midwife had bathed the child, she held it up to the sky declaring that the baby had been created to provide food and drink. If the infant was a boy, she also included the hope that he would become a courageous warrior. The midwife had three young boys who assisted her, and they called out the baby's name. It was then their duty to bury the umbilical cord. A baby boy's umbilicus and symbolic objects were buried in a field, representative of battle. The little girl's umbilical cord and a female symbol were buried in a corner of the house. Each of these spaces was indicative

[7] Soustelle, *The Daily Life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest,* 190.

[8] David Carrasco with Scott Sessions, *Daily Life of the Aztecs: People of the Sun and Earth* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), 95.

of where the child would be most productive in life.[9]

Beautiful metaphors for children indicate the Aztecs high regard for the new life that was brought forth. Mother, father, and midwife all referred to the babies as precious feather, precious green stone, precious bracelet, etc.; all lovely references to how much this child was valued in the Aztec society. However, it was a parent's most important job to ensure that their children did not become "fruitless trees," as referred to in an Aztec saying[10]. The fruitless tree is again a reference to a raw material that was a metaphor of the child.

The name of a child was dependent upon the moment of birth. A wise man (*tonalpoulqui*) was summoned from the temple soon after an infant was born, who correlated the time of birth to spiritual forces of the day using a horoscope. This could also determine a child's destiny, for if it were a negative sign, it could perhaps be concluded the child would become a thief or a person who performed ill deeds. If the child were born on an unlucky day, the *tonalpoulqui* would wait for a better day to name the child, thus giving it a chance for a better lot in life. Boys were named after a male family member, while girls were given names relating to flowers, stars, birds, etc.[11]

A ceremony was held twenty days after the birth in which parents chose the type of education they wanted for their child. If the priesthood was desired, the parents took the child to the *calmecac*, a temple school that educated future priests. It was generally children of dignitaries who were admitted to the calmecac, however children of various families were sometimes permitted to attend.[12] Pacts were sealed when the infant had incisions made in the body. Boys had their lower lips cut by an obsidian knife, and a jewel was inserted into the incision. Girls had cuts made in the hips and breasts.[13] These incisions indicated that the child was entering into a lifetime educational process, which was crucial to their lives. The other educational option was the *telpochcalli*, which generally produced ordinary citizens and warriors. Children lived with their parents until the age of fifteen before beginning their formal education.

[9] Ibid., 97.

[10] Ibid., 93.

[11] Victor W. von Hagen, *The Aztec: Man and Tribe* (New York, The New American Library, 1961), 69-70.

[12] Soustelle, *The Daily Life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest,* 169.

[13] Carrasco, *Daily Life of the Aztecs: People of the Sun and Earth,* 94.

Nursing infants were considered pure in Aztec society. Since the child had not yet eaten from the earth (maize), they were able to communicate to the gods directly. This correlation to corn was again observed during a growth ritual. Once every four years parents brought their children forward in a public ceremony. The children who had been born within the previous four years were held over a fire to be purified and would have their ears pierced and a cotton thread was inserted. The hole in the ear would gradually be expanded as the child grew, so that by the time of adulthood an ear ornament of up to 2 cm could be accommodated.[14] The growth ceremony included having an adult hold the child up by its forehead or neck. This was thought to help the child grow tall quickly, and is again another association to maize. Other stretching ceremonies included stretching the child's nose, neck, ears, fingers, and legs so as to encourage suitable development.

At four years of age, a child began to be given responsibilities. Girls were taught to weave while boys were responsible for carrying firewood, as again the gender differences are clearly evident. As the child aged, other duties were expected. Between seven and ten, boys began to fish while girls were expected to continue to cook and spin for the family. Although much loved, children were expected to observe the rules. These included such rules as walking quickly and dignified with head held high, speaking slowly with a soft voice, not being allowed to stare when speaking to another, no gossiping, eating and dressing with cleanliness and dignity, and always being obedient to elders[15]. These rules apparently pertained to children of all classes of Aztec society.

Children were often threatened with large, pointed *maguey* thorns for such offences as laziness, disobedience, negligence, and boastfulness. In the *Codex Mendoza*, there is a scene of a mother sticking her daughter's hands with a thorn as punishment. Another scene shows a boy being bound by the hands and feet with thorns stuck into his shoulders, back, and buttocks. Between the ages of ten and fourteen, punishments included having to breathe in chili smoke or being made to sleep on the cold, wet ground while bound.[16]

Fifteen was generally the age of much transition for a child. Children, whose parents had chosen the *calmecac* when the child was

[14] Rosemary Joyce, "Girling the Girl and Boying the Boy: The Production of Adulthood in Ancient Mesoamerica," *World Archaeology* (2000): 473-84.

[15] Carrasco, *Daily Life of the Aztecs: People of the Sun and Earth,* 103.

[16] Ibid., 102.

twenty days old, began their priestly education at the temple school. Much self-sacrifice of all kinds, spiritual, mental, and physical, was included in the regimen. Fifteen-year-old boys who were not educated for the priesthood were usually sent to the *telpochcalli*. Mostly commoners, these young men were trained for military warfare. Other duties learned at the *telpochcalli* were citizenship, arts, crafts, and history. A girl not attending the *calmecac,* thus not a priestess, was generally considered of marriageable age by the age of sixteen. Men were on average twenty years old when they married.[17] Thus parents had done their job well of raising a child who was not a "fruitless tree."

As this paper has demonstrated, an Aztec child took part in many rituals throughout childhood. From the time a child was quite small, sacrifice had played a large part in some of these rituals. The naming ceremony at the age of twenty days involved cutting incisions in the infant's skin. Agricultural festivals in the spring involved cutting the earlobes of all infants and, if the child were a male his penis would be cut as well, as a form of bloodletting.[18] In a New Fire ceremony, which occurred once every fifty-two years, all the citizens would slice their earlobes with a sharp knife and flick the blood toward the new fire that had been built on a hill. This included the ears of infants and children.[19]. Therefore, no matter how young, all were required to give some form of themselves to the gods.

The topic of sacrifice in the Aztec culture has fascinated, yet horrified people, from other cultures for hundreds of years. When it comes to the sacrifice of children, it is even more so. However, it must be remembered that the Aztec's sacrificial aspects can be correlated to the fables of the ancestral Toltecs.[20] Throughout time, the sun was not an old sun reborn. Rather it was a brand new sun. The new sun was created by the destruction of the old sun along with the sacrifice of a body. Therefore, without a death by sacrifice, life could not continue.[21] In many of the stories of Aztec creation, for something new to be born, an old thing must rot and be eaten.

[17] George C. Vaillant, *Aztecs of Mexico: Origin, Rise, and Fall of the Aztec Nation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, & Company, Inc., 1944),111.

[18] Read, "The Fleeting Moment."

[19] Read, *Time and Sacrifice in the Aztec Cosmos*, 126.

[20] Ibid., 34.

[21] Frances F. Berdan, *The Aztecs of Mexico, An Imperial Society* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982), 114.

Children played a large role in the ritual dedicated to the rain god, Tlaloc, which was performed to bring needed rain for the crops. Blood from children was obligatory and this was acquired through small incisions, such as in the tongue. Actual child sacrifice was also performed at the end of the dry season. Two children were selected to be offered up to the rain gods. The tears that they invariably shed before their sacrifice were offered to Tlaloc so that he released much needed rain. In one year of a particularly dire drought, forty-two children between the ages of two and six were sacrificed. It was believed that the earth needed more than just a small sip of water, as represented by the crying children's tears. In such a dire circumstance, much water was needed; therefore the quantity of children sacrificed was greatly increased. This is the only time that such a large number of children were offered, it would never happen again.[22]

The Aztec practice of human sacrifice, including the sacrifice of children, is perhaps the most familiar image of Aztec society. It was widely accepted that sacrifice was necessary to feed the gods or to keep the sun on a daily course. Other theories abound for sacrifice and the eating of human flesh, of which the Aztecs did partake. Such theories include protein deficiencies, geopolitical conditions, ideological functions, environmental conscription, and so on.[23] It has also been theorized that the sacrifices that were initially performed as impulses, grew to become obsessions.[24] It was deemed an honor to be chosen as one who would feed the gods through sacrifice. Those sacrificed were believed to have a wonderful afterlife for their gift of themselves.[25] Therefore, it must be assumed that a child that was offered in a sacrifice to the gods was extremely valued in the society in which he or she lived.

Children *were* a part of the sacrificial aspect of the society, but the blood of the children, or the sacrifice of a child, was crucial to the practice of keeping the gods appeased. It must also be remembered that this sacrifice was a minor part of the daily lives of the Aztecs. Each day brought about chores and restraint to reinforce the characteristics that the Aztecs so wanted to pass on to their

[22] Read, *Time and Sacrifice*, 180.

[23] Michael Winkelman, "Aztec Human Sacrifice: Cross-Cultural Assessments of the Ecological Hypothesis," *Ethnology* (1998): 285-99.

[24] Nigel Davies, *The Aztecs* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), 169.

[25] Berdan, *The Aztecs of Mexico, An Imperial Society,* 115.

children, such as discipline, obedience, and strength. The rituals that were so prevalent throughout life and began before birth, were rituals that helped the children grow with a faith in the gods and the realization that each life was a connection to a grand civilization, a civilization of which children were an integral part.