

Priests

Each of the gods had one or more temples where its idol was kept, and each had a group of full-time priests dedicated to its worship.¹⁴ Most priests were men who had begun their training early, in the *calmecac*. Noble youths who showed ability and inclination were joined by promising commoner boys whose parents had dedicated them to the priesthood. These young men carried the title *tlamacazton* ("Little priest") and spent about a year learning the rudiments of priestly lore and duties. The most accomplished of them were chosen to become full priests, or *tlamacazqui* ("Giver of things"). Female priests, *cihuatlamacazqui* or "Female giver of things," were less common than males. Also trained at the *calmecac*, most of these women served for only a short while and then left the priesthood to marry.

Priests had three main types of duties. Most important was the performance of rituals. Priests kept the sacred fires burning in large braziers, played music at ceremonies, and made numerous offerings to the gods. They left food for idols, offered their own blood by autosacrifice, and burned incense. Incense made from the sap of the *copal* tree was offered at nearly all ritual occasions. Priests used long-handled "frying-pan" incense burners whose straight hollow handles symbolized serpents. These censers were often depicted in drawings of priests and ceremonies, and archaeologists have excavated countless fragments around both temples and houses at Aztec sites. A second type of priestly duty was administration and caretaking. Priests managed the economy of the temples, including construction, personnel, and provisions. They took care of the idols and sacred objects, and they were constantly sweeping for cleanliness and symbolic purification. The third priestly duty was in the realm of education and learning. Priests ran the *calmecac*, supervised the *tlamacazton* and lay personnel, and kept the sacred books. Priests were literate, and they were the repositories of Aztec learning and knowledge concerning the gods and rituals, the calendar, and astronomy.

Above the *tlamacazqui* was a smaller group of elite priests called fire priests, *tlenamacac* or "Fireseller." These priests were responsible for the performance of the highest ritual, human sacrifice. Regular priests assisted at the stone of sacrifice, but only a fire priest could wield the lethal flint-knife. At the top of the priestly hierarchy were two high priests with the title *quetzalcoatl*. The holiest and most devout of all priests, one presided over each temple at the top of the Templo Mayor pyramid--the Tlaloc temple and the Huitzilopochtli temple.

Priests must have presented a terrible picture to outsiders. Their faces and bodies were dyed black. Much of their body was scarred and mutilated from constant bloodletting. Their unwashed

hair, worn long, became matted with dried blood from their ears and tongue. The fire priests and their assistants were also covered with blood from sacrifices. Why so much blood?

Human Blood Offerings

The myths recounted above established the rationale for human blood offerings. The gods sacrificed themselves to create the world and sun, and they offered their own blood to create people. Humankind owed a tremendous debt to the gods, and this debt could only be discharged through frequent offerings of human blood. The Aztecs accomplished this duty through two practices: autosacrifice and human sacrifice.

Autosacrifice

The god Quetzalcoatl performed the first act of autosacrifice when he bled himself to give life to the bones of the ancients. Other gods also bled themselves, as shown in a carved stone relief from Tenochtitlán (figure 9.6A) in which Tezcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli pierce their ears. All people engaged in autosacrifice at some point in their lives, usually to petition the gods for agricultural or human fertility. Human blood was linked to fertility in all Mesoamerican religions, and blood was the most valuable substance one could offer to the gods.

The most common act of autosacrifice was to pierce one's earlobes or upper ear with pointed *maguey* thorns. Sometimes other parts of the body were pierced, including the tongue, thigh, upper arm, chest, and genitals. The most devout practitioners (priests, for the most part) would pierce their flesh and then pull hollow straws or reeds through the hole. Priests engaged in autosacrifice nightly. They bathed and purified themselves, burnt incense, and proceeded to a secluded spot where they carried out the ritual. Friar Sahagún listed four different kinds of bloodletting practiced by the priests: "the drawing of straws," "the offering of thorns," "the bloodying," and "the cutting of ears"¹⁵ (figure 9.6B).

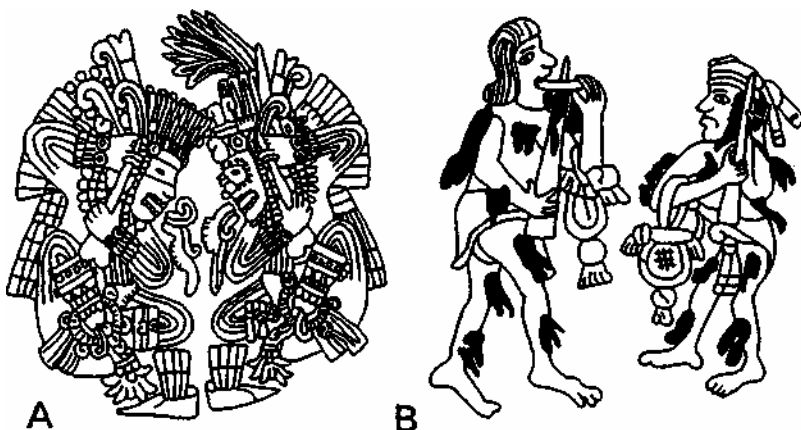


Figure 9.6 Rituals of autosacrifice. A: The gods Tezcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli pierce their ears with pointed bones (from a carved stone; image after Nicholson and Quinones Keber 1983:31); B: Two priests pierce their tongue and ear with maguey thorns (After Codex Magliabechiano 1983:f.79r; drawings by Ellen Cesarski)

Although autosacrifice was an important and prevalent ritual, it was only a substitute for the more powerful human sacrifice. In the words of art historian Cecilia Klein, "autosacrifice from the beginning was viewed as a symbolic death substituted for the real thing and, as such, as a debt payment made in return for continued life."¹⁶

Heart Sacrifice

Friar Sahagún's Nahuatl informants described a heart sacrifice as follows:

Thus was performed the sacrificial slaying of men, when captives and slaves died, who were called "Those who have died for the god."

Thus they took [the captive] up [to the pyramid temple] before the devil,¹⁷ [the priests] going holding him by his hands. And he who was known as the arranger [of captives], this one laid him out upon the sacrificial stone.



Figure 9.7 A heart sacrifice on a temple-pyramid. Next to the feather banner the heart is offered up to the sun. The body of the victim of a previous sacrifice rests at the base of the stairs, which are covered with blood (After Codex Magliabechiano 1983:f.70r; drawing by Ellen Cesarski)

And when he had laid him upon it, four men stretched him out, [grasping] his arms and legs.

And already in the hand of the fire priest lay the [sacrificial] knife, with which he was to slash open the breast of the ceremonially bathed [captive]. And then, when he had split open his breast, he at once seized his heart. And he whose breast he laid open was quite alive. And when [the priest] had seized his heart, he dedicated it to the sun.¹⁸

After the heart was removed, the victims "were sent rolling down the steps of the temple, and the steps were bathed in blood."¹⁹ A priest then cut off the head for mounting on a skull rack next to the pyramid. Such a sacrifice was illustrated in the *Codex Magliabecchiano* (figure 9.7).

The victims of this ritual were not considered ordinary mortals. They were viewed as deities whose deaths repeated the original sacrificial deaths of gods described in myth. The key Aztec concept here was *ixiptla*, often translated as "deity impersonator." The preparations for a sacrifice began long before the actual cut of the knife, sometimes as much as a year in advance. A victim was chosen to become the god on a set date some time in the future. Through a series of rites, the human victim was transformed into the embodiment of the god on earth. The greatly-respected *ixiptla* spent his last days or months living as a god, and when the day of sacrifice arrived, he went with honor to meet his fate.

Most victims for sacrifice were enemy warriors captured in battle. The captor sponsored the sacrifice, thereby gaining prestige. The higher the rank of the victim, the greater the honor. Captives were brought back from the battleground and housed until the time for their ceremony of transformation. Victims were carefully chosen to match the requirements of the god to be honored. Most gods required warriors for their *ixiptla* although some were satisfied with slaves purchased for the occasion. Tlaloc required children for his *ixiptla*, either purchased as slaves or the secondary offspring of nobles. Women were sometimes sacrificed as *ixiptla* for female deities. The most stringent requirements were those of Tezcatlipoca for the sacrifice in the monthly ceremony of Toxcatl. His *ixiptla*, selected a full year in advance, had to be a handsome, well-bred youth with no bodily imperfections.

The transformation from human to *ixiptla* began with a physical and ritual cleansing. Slaves purchased for sacrifice in particular had to be bathed carefully to erase all traces of impurity. The cleansed victim was then dressed in the clothing and insignia of the god. Once fully attired, he became the god and was addressed and worshipped accordingly. The *ixiptla* carried out the rituals specified for that god, such as dancing, singing, and making special ceremonial processions through

the city. He was attended by priests and given many luxuries, including delicacies to eat and women for sexual pleasure.

To be chosen as an *ixiptla* was considered a great honor. Warriors were prepared to die proudly and honorably if they were captured. The respect and admiration granted an *ixiptla* must have affected the victim greatly. According to the nobles who gave Friars Sahagún and Durán their information, sacrificial victims mounted the bloody steps of the pyramid with dignity and pride.

Not all sacrifices took place on top of a pyramid. The cult of Xipe Totec, whose priests dressed in the flayed skin of sacrificial victims (figure 9.5), included two spectacular forms of sacrifice. In the so-called "gladiator sacrifice," an especially brave captive warrior was tied to a large, carved, circular stone and forced to fight a mock battle with an experienced Mexica soldier. The victim was given a sword whose obsidian blades had been replaced by feathers, but his adversary was fully armed and dressed for battle. In the "arrow sacrifice," the victim was tied spread-eagled to a wooden frame and shot full of arrows so that his blood dripped on the ground. In addition to these sacrifices to Xipe Totec, some victims were sacrificed by burning in a large fire pit, and others simply had their necks slit.

Many sacrifices were followed by a ceremonial meal at which the family of the captor or sponsor ate a portion of the victim's body. This was a highly religious occasion designed to honor the victim's memory. The victim was viewed as a symbolic kin relation of his captor, and this act of cannibalism was a sacred part of the whole ritual of sacrifice. Only a portion of the body was eaten, for this meal had a symbolic not a nutritional significance.²⁰ The gods also partook of the blood of the victims. After some sacrifices, the sponsor gathered up the blood in a bowl and "placed upon the lips of all [the images of] the devils the blood of him who had died for the gods."²¹

Explaining Aztec Sacrifice

Many ancient peoples around the world practiced human sacrifice, from the Greeks and Hebrews to the Inca and Maya. But few cultures made sacrifice such a central part of their religion as the Aztecs, and few cultures carried out human sacrifice on the same scale as the Aztecs.²² Over the years anthropologists have attempted to account for the importance and prevalence of human sacrifice in Aztec religion. Some very different hypotheses have been proposed to explain this phenomenon. The most obvious explanation, one that would have been given by the Aztecs themselves, is that the gods required sacrifices. Aztec religion held that sacrifices were needed to keep the universe going. Most Aztecs were deeply religious people, and they believed their myths

and religious precepts. Simply put, priests practiced sacrifice, and people put up with sacrifice, because they believed that it was necessary for the continued existence of the universe.

This religious explanation for human sacrifice is fine as far as it goes. One cannot understand the existence or nature of such practices without reference to the beliefs behind them. Nevertheless, anthropologists know that a people's own rationalization for their behavior often provides only a partial explanation for their actions. Aztec myths may explain why people practiced human sacrifice, but not why they practiced it so frequently. Nor do they explain why sacrifice was so common among the many widely dispersed ethnic groups who made up Aztec civilization. Could not the Aztecs have held fast to their myths and paid their debt to the gods with only a few sacrifices a year and with far less elaboration in the means of killing victims? To understand the pervasive nature of Aztec human sacrifice one must consider not only religious belief, but also the other purposes human sacrifice may have served in Aztec society.

In the 1970s, anthropologist Michael Harner gained media attention for his suggestion that the prevalence of sacrifice among the Aztecs could be explained by a lack of protein in their diet. Compared to most cultures around the world, the Aztec diet contained very little meat. Certainly, the rapidly growing population had depleted the game resources of most areas and the Aztecs did not have large, domesticated herd animals on which they could rely for meat. Therefore, Harner argued, sacrifice was stepped up to provide meat in the diet. This theory is more noteworthy for its media attention than for its scholarly rigor.²³ As I discuss in chapter 3, the relatively small contribution of meat to the Aztec diet did not prevent people from getting adequate protein. Processed maize was complemented by beans to provide a complete protein source. Intensification of agricultural practices gave larger crop yields. The Aztecs did not need to resort to cannibalism to meet their protein needs.

A third explanation for the extent of Aztec human sacrifice, the explanation most commonly accepted today, stresses political factors. Aztec politics and religion were closely entwined. Kings ruled with the blessing of the gods, and the priests and temples were under the protection of the state. Human sacrifices were carried out in the service of politics. They were used as a form of external propaganda to demonstrate to other kingdoms the awesome power of the gods and the state. Extensive sacrifices at major public ceremonies advertised this power to subjects, allies, and enemies alike. Enemy rulers who attended the coronation of a Mexica king, for example, and were forced to witness the sacrifice of their own captured soldiers received a potent message about the superiority and might of the Aztec empire.

Propaganda by terror also was directed toward commoner subjects. Sacrifices were public spectacles that took place in highly visible settings - on top of the pyramid and in the open city plaza. Witnessing the gruesome deaths of not only enemy soldiers but also local slaves, infants, and the occasional free commoner must have made most people think twice before engaging in any form of resistance against their king or local noble. Just as commoners paid tribute in goods and services to nobles, so humans paid sacred tribute in blood to the gods. Both practices were obligatory debt payments, and the analogy between tribute and sacrifice was not lost on the Aztec people. This political use of human sacrifice was a feature of all Aztec city-states, not just Tenochtitlán. The Mexica of Tenochtitlán, however, carried sacrifice to great lengths, particularly at the great central temple-pyramid, the Templo Mayor.