

## David Carrasco, *The Aztecs: A Very Short History*

### The education of the “precious necklaces”

A father who was delivering his child to the first day of school gave this speech: “Our lord, lord of the near, of the nigh, [this child] is your property, he is your venerable child. We place him under your power, your protection with other venerable children; because you will teach him, educate him, because you will make eagles, make ocelots of them, because you instruct him for our mother, our father, Tlaltecuhli, Tonatiuh.”

These words reflect the Aztec view that education integrated humans into a wider field of being where nature, society, and the divine overlapped and interacted constantly. The reference to eagles and ocelots points toward a military vocation, and the mention of two deities shows that religious teachings were part of any Aztec curriculum. Human survival depended on the “lord of the near and nigh” who protected children and punished them with sacred powers. Aztec parents knew what all Aztec children were required to learn that their true parents were the gods.

This relationship between family, temple-schools, and the divinities was sealed during the first visit to the school when priests made incisions on the bodies of children—visible signs of social and spiritual change. The lower lips of boys were pierced and a jewel was inserted. Girls had small cuts made on their breasts and hips with obsidian blades. These incisions signified their initiation into the lifelong educational process upon which their lives depended. The Aztec equivalent of the verb “to educate” was *tlacahuapahua* or *tlacazcaltia*, which meant “to strengthen persons” or “to make persons grow.” This growing and strengthening was accomplished through a series of rituals over many years that incorporated children, teenagers, and young adults into the work of the family, society, agriculture, and warfare.

Affection and discipline were the handmaidens of healthy growth in children. They were encouraged to express their feelings and

attitudes openly even as they were carefully watched by their parents and given constant correction. At age four, children underwent a special growth ritual called “They Stretch Their Necks” when they were purified by fire, had their earlobes pierced and earrings inserted, and then were lifted by their foreheads and had their limbs stretched. In another ceremony held every 260 days, on the day 4 Movement, their noses, necks, ears, fingers, and legs were pulled to encourage proper growth during the next 260-day cycle. Here, the children were introduced to the sacred numbers 4 and 260 (associated with the four directions of the cosmos and the completion of the ritual calendar), which would continue to guide them even after death. Some Spanish priests remarked on the high quality of Aztec childcare and recorded numerous eloquent praises spoken to children by their parents and midwives. For instance, young girls were called “my precious necklace, thou who art my precious feather, . . . my creation, . . . my blood, my color, my image.”

Young Aztecs were given meticulous instructions on personal hygiene, social graces, and what to avoid in their daily lives. Eight teachings were given to the children of well-to-do families. The first involved spending some nights in pious vigil praying to the “lord of the near and nigh” during which they would offer incense and sweep the temple or home. The second admonished them to walk in public with upright postures, prudence, and dispatch “lest thou be named fool, shameless.” Children were not to look directly into anyone’s eyes when speaking, especially when talking to people outside the family. Staring at a woman, especially a married woman, was considered a clear sexual advance and could be severely punished. Gossip and rumor-mongering was to be avoided at all costs for in the Aztec world, plots of a social or magical nature inevitably led to a life of crime. Showing up for work or appointments on time was crucial as the Aztecs loathed laziness, negligence, and haughtiness. Priests sometimes hit lazy persons with a club. A public dress code emphasized neatness and the avoidance of ostentatious display. Capes were to be carefully tied to

cover the shoulder or else the person would be thought a buffoon, a mad person, and graceless. Public speaking was to be done softly with proper rhythm and breath control. Sounding like a groaning or squeaking person was to be strictly avoided. Finally, the strongest warnings concerned what one put into one's mouth. Prudent eating and drinking was a virtue; gluttony and sloppiness was considered physically and socially reprehensible and dangerous. Hands and faces had to be washed before each meal and when eating with others. "Do not quickly seat thyself... and when the eating is over, thou art quickly to seize the washbowls" went the instruction.

Scenes from the *Codex Mendoza* show that strict discipline included punishments for unacceptable behaviors, including laziness, rudeness, and boastfulness. Seriously disobedient boys had their hands and feet bound and maguey thorns stuck into their shoulders, backs, and buttocks. When reprimands failed to change behavior, the disobedient were forced to inhale chili smoke or were tied hand and foot and made to sleep on damp ground all night. The Aztecs had a saying they applied to unruly children indicating the seriousness of bad behavior. It went "*Anjtlanammati, Anjtlatamati,*" meaning "I heed no mother, I heed no father."

The source of these harsh measures was, in part, the Aztec perception that they dwelled within a hazardous cosmos full of social and spiritual dangers and eruptions of chaos in the forms of diseases, wild animals, earthquakes, storms, rivals, and enemies. "On earth we travel, we live along a mountain peak. Over here there is an abyss, over there is an abyss. Wherever thou art to deviate, wherever thou art to go astray, there wilt thou fall, there wilt thou plunge into the deep."

The Aztecs constantly preached discipline and frugality, especially in relation to sexual promiscuity and drunkenness. Sexual activity before marriage was considered dangerous because it led to skin ailments and death. Both males and females were pressured to abstain from sex until married as it protected the heart from being

infected with "excrement" and self destruction. The young woman was a "precious green stone, yet a precious turquoise," who was to be kept clean, pure, and without sexual experience until a husband was chosen. Young women were also taught that when the right young man came along, the one sent by one of the divinities (meaning a match made in heaven), the young woman must be ready to commit herself all the way. "Give thyself not to the wanderer, to the restless one who is given to pleasure, to the evil youth... When thou hast seen the one who, together with thee he will endure to the end, do not abandon him. Seize him, hang onto him even though he be a poor person, even though he be a poor eagle warrior, a poor ocelot warrior."

Young Aztec males also felt these pressures pushing hard against the desires of puberty. In order to achieve a "good heart" the young man should emulate devout priests, penitents, chaste men, elders, scribes, and warriors who brought honor to themselves in war, and avoid "lust for vice, for filth... that which is deadly. For the lord of the near, of the nigh, hath said, thou art ordained one woman for one man, ... thou art not to devour, to gulp down the carnal life as if thou wert a dog." The real goal was sexual control so as to produce in marriage rugged, agile children who were clean and beautiful. We can appreciate these intense messages when we learn that for the Aztecs, a sexual transgression injured not just the person committing the immoral act but the parents, siblings, and friends of the trespasser as well. Sexual misconduct grew into a social contagion, a spiritual-psychological virus, a noxious force that grew and spread through the family, neighborhood, and friends.

Education in the *calmecac* included military, mechanical, astrological, and religious training. Youths, both male and female (but in separate schools), were taught from large pictorial manuscripts telling of the genealogy, history, geography, mythology, laws, and arts of society. As in other schools, songs and dances were central to *calmecac* life. Divine songs telling of the

lives of gods, dreams, and the calendar were taught, recited, danced, and sung. Although this school was particularly attractive to noble families, it appears that common folk also dedicated their children to the rigors and riches of the *calmeca*.

Another important school was the *telpochcalli*, or “young man’s house,” where the great majority of fifteen-year-old boys, mostly commoners, were trained for military life. Since the *telpochcalli* involved focused preparation for warfare, the school’s instructors demanded from these youths total attention, great physical effort, bravery, and the ability to withstand intense pain. The entire society believed that its well-being depended on the training and courage of its defenders, and it put major demands on the *telpochcalli* to develop powerful warriors.

### A hard lesson for Aztec youth

While Aztecs greatly enjoyed pleasure, skillful wordplay, and many types of art, they also learned the harder lessons about human life. Even today in some indigenous communities the following song is sung:

We live here on this earth  
We are all fruits of the earth  
The earth sustains us  
We grow here, on the earth and flower  
And when we die  
We wither in the earth  
We are all fruits of the earth  
We eat of the earth  
Then the earth eats us.

A vision of reciprocity between humans, nature, and the gods was taught early to Aztec children who heard that the earth was not only a garden that fed us but also a hungry mouth: cosmic jaws that demanded to be fed by humans. All humans would suffer death, which was a destruction and fragmentation, but it

was also an entrance into another world where another kind of life existed, regulated by rituals. Children were also reassured that if they died in early childhood they would have a good afterlife and be suckled by a tree in paradise. When young children died they became green stones and precious turquoise and bracelets. They did not go to the terrible place of icy winds called Mictlan but rather to Xochatlalpan (Place of the Abundance of the Water of Flowers), where they suckled from an eternal tree of sustenance.

As one grew older, however, the options for life and life after death grew more diverse. Children learned how their bodies contained not one but three animistic entities whose ultimate destinies were determined by the manner in which one lived and died. These three “souls” were the *tonalli*, located in the head, which was the soul of will and intelligence; the *teyolia*, located in the heart, which was the soul of fondness and vitality; and the *ihiyotl*, located in the liver, which was the soul of passion, luminous gas, and aggression. All three were gifts from the gods deposited in the human body, but animals, plants, and objects also had animistic forces within them. At the time of death, these three souls dispersed into different regions of the universe. Although the texts about this separation of souls are not always consistent, it appears that they could go to one of four places: Mictlan, in the underworld, for those who died an ordinary death; the sun in the sky, for warriors who died in combat, people sacrificed to the sun, and women who died while giving birth for the first time; Tlalocan, the rain god’s mountain paradise, for those whose death was caused by water or water-related forces like frost or cold sicknesses; or Chichihualcuaueco, which was exclusively reserved for infants who died while still nursing from their mothers, that is, who had not yet eaten from the earth.

One interesting teaching was that a divine dog, which dwelled in the afterlife, could assist in the journey of the *teyolia* soul. The flames of cremation would beckon the dog in the underworld at

the shore of a subterranean river to help the soul of the dead cross to the other side, where gift offerings were made to Mictlantecuhtli, the Lord of the Dead. Sacrificed warriors were believed to carry the gifts of war they had worn or held when they were dispatched on the sacrificial stone. In some cases these included the feathers of powerful birds that would help them, in the afterlife, to fly across the heavens with the sun.

It appears that at least one of the souls, the *teyolia*, which resided in the heart, did not leave the body until cremation. This was especially true of a dead ruler, who could still be in communication, through the *teyolia*, with his ministers until his body was burned. The fire that consumed the cadaver carried the soul on its journey to its appropriate place in the afterlife. The fire ritual was the occasion when relatives made offerings, shed tears, and said prayers at the hearth. These ritual actions protected the soul and gave it strength during its dangerous journey. In the case of certain rulers, the servants were sacrificed and cremated on a nearby pyre, but their hearts were extracted and burned on the same pyre as the dead *tlatoani*. These hearts, the *teyolia* of the servants, along with vessels of invigorating drinks and royal clothes, accompanied the soul of the ruler and protected it on its journey.

This means that the Aztecs had a practice somewhat similar to the cult of relics we associate with medieval Europe. The bones of rulers and others who attained a divine reputation while alive were kept in special containers (boxes, vases, or jars) and displayed or buried in temples. They would receive offerings and, in exchange, the souls of the deceased would lend strength and protection to the community. A number of these relic containers have been excavated at the Great Aztec Temple in the last thirty years.

A powerful religious imagination was imparted to growing children during their schooling in the *calmecac* or *telpochcalli*. They learned that the souls of the dead could travel to an afterlife,

but parts could also stay close to the family, city, or community because they were not confined to the physical limits of the body or its remains. One could be inspired, enhanced, or haunted by these lingering parts of souls. The souls of the dead could also become attached to and integrated within gods or goddesses, thus revitalizing them. This was particularly true of rulers, great warriors, and distinguished artists and poets. The one outstanding example was Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, who ruled the fabled Toltecs. It is said that when he was cremated, his *teyolia* rose up into the sky and changed into the planet Venus, which the Toltecs called Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli, the Lord of the House of Dawn.

Beings of all kinds—plants, gods, animals, humans, insects, water, and stones—shared in a co-essence, and the closeness of humans and gods was evident in the burial practices. The Spanish friar Bartolomé de las Casas, who spent years living among, ministering to, and protecting indigenous peoples, witnessed and participated in many burials. He wrote about the elaborate speeches, rites, and mourning practices, and reported that people commonly dressed the deceased in the different clothes and insignia of the gods. Children were clothed as the god they believed to be their protector; merchants were dressed as merchant gods; the families of those individuals executed for adultery made small images of Tlazolteotl, the goddess of sexual transgression. For those who drowned, their families made images of the water god, Tlaloc, in hopes he would watch after their souls in the afterlife.