

Chapter 5

Women and children: weavers of life and precious necklaces

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

Spanish chroniclers have left us a contradictory image of the lives of Aztec women. One view tells us that a woman's place was "in the heart of the home, ... her home was only within the house." But when the Spaniards laid siege to the capital and the young ruler Cuauhtemoc lacked warriors to defend the city, he "had all the women ascend to the flat roofs of the houses where they made gestures of scorn to the Spaniards." Cortés "became afraid and feared that he would not be able to conquer Mexico." Women were also sacrificed in ceremonies designed to regenerate the maize fields and in one ritual a piece of a woman's thigh skin is transported to the frontier of the Aztec empire and set up on a post as a provocative dare to the male warriors of an enemy kingdom.

The primary roles of Aztec women were homemakers, priestesses, and midwives as well as rearers of children, known as "precious necklaces," in family and school. But their work, social roles, and symbolic value extended throughout the daily life of the Aztec empire even as they ruled the domesticated spaces of village and city.

Aztec women at home in the world

Many scenes in the *Codex Mendoza* portraying the Aztec lifecycle focus on the lives of females. In the bathing and naming ceremony

that children underwent four days after birth, the social destiny of boys and girls was signaled by the first objects they were given to hold and play with. The male child was encouraged to touch and grab a tiny bow, arrow, and shield signaling that his destiny was that of the warrior raised to defend and strengthen the society. Girls were given miniature spinning and weaving toys and a tiny broom to prepare them for life at home where they would clean, cook, and make clothing as wives and mothers. Women were central to this ritual moment as the midwife officiated the ceremony while the recently delivered mother watched over the tub of warm water awaiting the child. These midwives were medical specialists who gave eloquent speeches to new mothers and their babies, in this case, a newborn female: "My beloved maiden, my youngest one, noblewoman, thou has suffered exhaustion, thou has become fatigued. ... Our lord, the lord of the near, of the nigh, hath sent thee. ... Thou wilt be in the heart of the home, thou wilt go nowhere, thou wilt nowhere become a wanderer, thou becomest the banked fire, the hearth stones."

This is an exemplary domestic scene, governed by women who were the keepers of the fire, the experts in cooking, cleaning, raising children, and maintaining the household and its center. Although largely left out of the scholarly and public story until recently, it is becoming clear just how deeply intertwined women, children, and domestic spaces were in the transmission of cultural values and all aspects of the Aztec capital, rural communities, and empire. Females were powerful domesticators of social life and their skills as cooks, weavers, designers, lovers, and healers carried their influences far beyond the family home. Recent research reveals that women gathered the sap of the maguey plants and fermented it to make the alcoholic drink *octli* (*pulque*). They raised turkeys and plants, traveled to marketplaces where they exchanged farm produce, wild herbs, salt, torches, firewood, prepared foods, and textiles. Women were valued as healers and midwives, and Sahagún emphasized that they were honored for being "strong, rugged, energetic, wiry, ... exceedingly tough,

population. This demanded that a formidable ritual, pharmacological, and mythical knowledge be passed down from mother to daughter, woman to woman. Pictorial and ethnographic sources reveal that these women mixed natural and supernatural diagnoses and treatment strategies involving animals, plants, songs, sweat baths, and storytelling. Recent studies show that Aztec women had effective knowledge of a wide range of medicinal plants, many now considered useful according to Western biomedical practices and standards.

Women also played a significant role in the priesthood. In some cases, an infant girl was taken to the temple by her mother a month or so after birth and dedicated to temple service. When she was a mature teenager, she would become a *cihuatlamacazqui* (woman priest), living a celibate life in order to focus her energies on temple duties and the yearly round of ceremonies. The festival of Ochpaniztli, dedicated to the goddess Toci (Our Grandmother), was directed by a woman priest, while an assistant called Iztaccihuatl (White Woman, because she was painted white) was responsible for decorations, preparing the ritual areas, sweeping the sacred sites, and lighting and extinguishing the ritual fires. It was possible for a woman to leave the priesthood to be married, but the suitor had to make the proper approaches to the family, temple, and the young woman. One text tells us that a priestess could get married "if she were asked in marriage, if the words were properly said, if the fathers, the mothers, and the notables agreed."

We are fortunate to have some vivid descriptions of these priestesses dressing, dancing, and giving spirit, beauty, and power to the ceremonies. Decades after the conquest, Aztec elders recalled that "the women... were indeed carefully dressed.... Some of their skirts had designs of hearts; some had a mat design like birds' gizzards; some were ornamented like coverlets; some had designs like spirals or like leaves.... And some of their shifts had tawny streamers hanging, some had smoke symbols, some had dark green streamers hanging, some had house designs.... And

when they danced, they unbound their hair; their hair just covered each one of them like a garment. But they brought braids of their hair across their foreheads."

A special destiny awaited the souls of women who died in childbirth. These women were considered equal to warriors who died in battle or on the sacrificial stone. They too had sacrificed their own lives so that a new life could come into the world. Their souls ascended into the female side of heaven, where they dwelt together and accompanied the sun from its zenith to its setting. On certain dates their spirits would descend to earth and haunt the living to remind them of the suffering and contributions the women had made to their lives.

The sacred story and sculptures of the mother goddess Coatlicue (Serpent Skirt) and the moon goddess Coyolxauhqui (Painted Bells) demonstrate that female deities were immensely powerful in Aztec religion and daily life. Other goddesses of note included Mayahuel (*pulque*), Chalchiuhtlicue (lakes and rivers), Chicomecoatl (maize), and Huixtocihuatl (salt). These goddesses were close to the common peoples who worked as fishermen, farmers, salt gatherers, and boat people. A very popular goddess, who later became identified with the Virgin of Guadalupe, was Teteoinnan, also known as Toci, a patroness of midwives. Two fascinating goddesses were the beautiful Xochiquetzal (sexuality and feasting) and her counterpart Tlazolteotl (carnal transgression, filth, and absolution from sexual wrongdoing), who was revered by weavers, silversmiths, and sculptors.

Mothers trained their children to provide the home altars dedicated to goddesses with food, copal incense, and other acts of purification to start the day. This practice was carried on in more elaborate ways in the temple communities where priestesses tended the fires, incensed the statues of goddesses and gods, and kept them well adorned with beautifully woven and embroidered costumes.