

# DAILY LIFE OF

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# THE AZTECS

*Second Edition*

DAVÍD CARRASCO AND  
SCOTT SESSIONS

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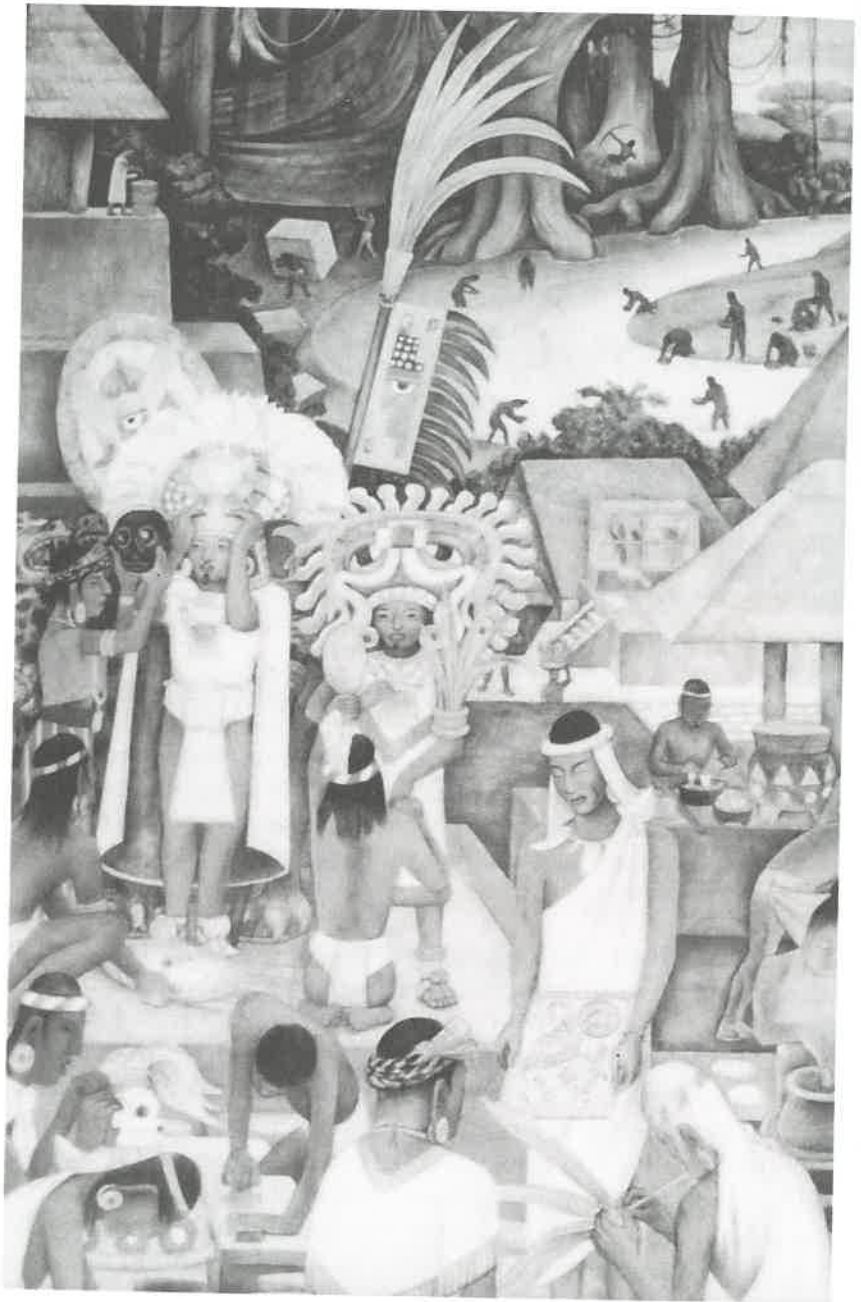
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# THE SOCIAL PYRAMID: MAINTAINING YOUR PLACE AND THE WORLD

When the ruler went forth, in his hand rested his reed stalk when he went moving in rhythm with his words. His chamberlains and his elders went before him; on both sides, on either hand, they proceeded as they went clearing the way for him. None might cross in front of him; none might come forth before him; none might look up at him; none might come face to face with him.<sup>1</sup>

This passage describes the appearance and procession of an Aztec ruler in public and introduces us to the principal idea of social stratification that organized and influenced all aspects of daily life. One of the most challenging realizations for students in the United States to confront is that most human societies are arrangements of unequal parts. Sociologists and novelists, for instance, have taught us that inequality and unequal access to privilege, prestige, status, and the goods of life are a common feature of human groups. North Americans, brought up under the rhetoric (though not the reality) that "all men are created equal," may be somewhat blind to the *hierarchical* nature of every human society, or at least every society constructed by urban arrangements. The Aztecs, like many peoples, constructed a pyramidal society, a hierarchical society. In the Aztec case, a basic division between nobles and commoners permeated all social action and was under the direction and sacred influence of the *tlatoni* and his lineage. In the preceding passage the ruler



Attendants dress and adorn an Aztec ruler in this Diego Rivera mural at the National Palace in Mexico City. (Courtesy of Scott Sessions)

emerges from his royal residence poised to direct social life according to the "rhythm of his words," for he is the chief speaker, the central source of the expressed law, wisdom, and will of the gods. As we shall see in chapter 6, the art of words—especially sacred words—was highly valued, and the ruler was the living embodiment of this art. He had been raised, through intense rites of passage, above all human beings, and he was told at his enthronement ceremony, "You are no longer a human being like us, we no longer see you as merely human."<sup>2</sup>

We see this social elevation reflected in the royal servants, chamberlains, and elders who preceded him to clear his path of common people. There is a proper symmetry, a dual symbolism, to this procession, as the ruler is guarded "on both sides, on either hand." One purpose of this protective balance is to ensure the physical and social distance between the ruler and the commoners; it is clear that this distance is both horizontal ("they went clearing the way") and emphatically vertical ("none might look up at him... none might come face to face"). He sits, rules, and walks—regardless of where he is in actual geography—at the symbolic apex of society, and no one except the gods or other rulers can cross his path.

The royal face that looked out or down on the rest of the world was carefully and luxuriously adorned, as the following passage shows. When the ruler danced, he was arrayed as a shining, moving image of beauty, wealth, and sacred wonder.

The [head] band with [two] quetzal feather tassels set off with gold, with which they bound their hair;

A quetzal feather crest device set off with gold, which he bore upon his back;

A finely wrought headdress of red spoonbill feathers, with flaring quetzal feathers, and with it a drum [covered] with gold—a device which he bore upon his back as he danced...

Golden ear plugs, which he inserted in [the lobes of his ears]...

A green stone lip plug set in gold;

A long, white labret of clear crystal, shot through with blue cotinga feathers, in a gold setting, which he inserted in his [lower] lip.

A long, yellow labret of amber in a gold setting...

A gold lip pendant in the form of a pelican;

A gold lip pendant in the form of an eagle;

A gold lip pendant in the form of a fire serpent;

A gold lip pendant in the form of a boating pole...

A green stone lip plug in the form of an eagle, fitted at the base in a gold setting...

A lip pendant of gold, in the form of a broad leafed water plant...

A necklace of radiating golden pendants with a thin, green stone disc set in their midst.<sup>3</sup>

This indeed is a royal head decorated with gold, quetzal feathers, green stone, and blue feathers, symbolizing the cosmic regions of the earth and sky, plants and animals, and artists and workers (the boating pole lip plug), all concentrated in the image of the noblest of the noble class, who moved through society displaying his cosmic power. When the ruler appeared in public, especially when he danced, the society was presented with a sacred performance of the social pyramid at its highest point. Even the drumming and the drums played were superior—the precious makers of cosmic sounds. “There were two-toned drums and supports of two-toned drums, ground drums, golden gourd rattles, and golden bells” marking out the movements of social triumph and superiority.

But we are led to ask a series of questions, including, “Who did the work to support this pyramid?” “Who made these objects?” and also, “How was the social pyramid, which divided the mass of people into the privileged class and the commoners, held together?” We see two powerful ideas somehow held together in the royal procession and dance, namely, a collective commitment by the people to social differentiation and inequality. As a means of exploring these questions, this chapter is controlled by the idea of the *locative view of the social world of the Aztecs*. A locative view holds that society and the entire cosmos work best when *everything and everyone find their correct places and conform to the requirements of those places in the universe*. In this view of the world, it is morally good to fit into your place, to find and stay within the boundaries of your social group and your working profession, and to contribute to the overall balance of society by conforming to the sacred instructions of your lineage. Doing the right thing means being in the right social place. The Aztecs were not tolerant of dissent, doing your own thing, hanging out, or blurring distinctions. Alfredo López Austin sums it up clearly:

A child grew up in a hierarchical environment in his home and in his temple-school. The first distinction he learned to make was among the members of his nuclear family. The rules for internal rank were reinforced by fear of bodily harm. If a child drank before his elder brother, his growth would be arrested. If he didn't keep his proper distance from old people, the vital forces they accumulated with the years could do him harm... The first objects a child touched were the instruments of his future trade—gifts from the *calpulli's* patron god—and while still in the cradle the child

was offered to god in the temple-school to bind him in a definitive way to the institution where he would be taught under the traditional canons of society.<sup>4</sup>

In these ways, people were locked into a social world from the start to the end of their lives and even in the afterlife. This is a locative view of the world. But how does it get constructed? How is this great social pyramid maintained? And why did commoners support a social structure that gave them limited benefits? It is crucial to understand the beliefs and ideas that established and protected social differentiation. Believing in fitting in was essential to the well-being of the social pyramid, and in what follows we will study some of the central ideas, symbols, and actions that *separated and linked* the rulers, nobles, warriors, merchants, and commoners in a world of social difference.

### BELIEVING IN FITTING IN

In chapter 2, we learned that the Aztec world was permeated and energized by divine forces that formed an ordered, detailed, and balanced cosmos. Recalling the image of the cosmos from the *Codex Fejérváry-Mayer*, we are impressed by the amount of organized detail of the world of the gods. Each quarter of the universe is precisely organized by gods, sacred birds, colors, and trees filled with the soul forces of *tonalli* and *teyolia*. This precise ordering of the cosmos meant, first, that the gods required human beings to work together in keeping society in a balanced state. Second, this balance meant that certain human groups had specific tasks that focused and limited their social existence in service to the whole of society. Third, each social group, such as the featherworkers, traders, goldsmiths, cape sellers, cacao sellers, clay workers, and tailors, had patron deities who guided their work and social life and whom they honored. One group in particular, the *pipiltin*, was made by the gods and trained to rule the rest of society. Another group, the *macehuallin* majority, was made to work for the benefit of society under the control of the *pipiltin*. Rituals, teachings, social posture, gesture, clothes, and stories all trained people to believe in the need to fit into this overall social model and picture of the universe. It must be emphasized that in the Aztec view of the cosmos and society, failure to conform to your place as a *macehualli* or a *pilli* (and the specific jobs and responsibilities within these two general categories) resulted not only in physical punishment, but also in the release of harmful magical forces that could contaminate

one's family and neighborhood. A social outcast who had not effectively fit in to his or her social role could be designated a *tetzahuitl*, a person who sent out harmful forces and created fear, scandal, and danger.<sup>5</sup>