

THE MEXICO READER

History, Culture, Politics

Edited by Gilbert M. Joseph and Timothy J. Henderson

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS DURHAM AND LONDON 2002

The Cost of Courage in Aztec Society

Inga Clendinnen

Without a doubt, the most famous aspect of Aztec culture is its propensity for violent ritual, most notably human sacrifice on a grand scale. This fact has presented historians with a dilemma, for it seems that too much emphasis on such gory practices promotes sensationalism and only serves to distract readers from more noble and seemingly aspects of Aztec society, as well as from the everyday life and culture of the people. Although the point is well-taken, it must also be recognised, that to gloss over or ignore Aztec ritual is to overlook the very thing that the Aztecs themselves viewed as their most important function on earth. For the Aztecs, particularly the ruling élites, warfare and ritual were functions of their religion—a religion which, like any other, was at heart a complex expression of humanity's place in nature and the cosmos.

The best historians, of course, seek not to sensationalise but to explain. Few in recent years can rival cultural historian Inga Clendinnen, professor at La Trobe University in Australia. In the following article, she examines the remarkably complex rituals of warfare and sacrifice in order to achieve some understanding of what these rituals actually meant to the Aztecs.

Proud of itself
is the city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan.
Here no one fears to die in war. This
is our glory....

Who could conquer Tenochtitlan?
Who could shake the foundation of heaven?

Today we are tempted to read this fragment of an Aztec song-poem as a familiar piece of bombast: the aggressive military empire which insists on its invincibility, its warriors strangers to fear. In what follows I want to indicate how the business of war was understood in the great city of Tenochtitlan, and then . . . to enquire into how warrior action was sustained and explained, in the hope of drawing closer to an Aztec reading of this small text.

THAT TENOCHTITLAN WAS the creation of war and the courage and stamina of its young fighting men indisputable. The splendid city which Cortes and his men saw shimmering above its lake waters

autumn of 1519 had been founded as a miserable collection of mud huts less than two hundred years before. . . .

[By the mid-1400s, under Emperor] Moctezuma the Elder, the armies of the Triple Alliance of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tlacopan spilled beyond the valley to carve out the broad shape of their magnificent if unstable tribute empire. That expansion was paralleled by the increasing magnificence of Tenochtitlan. In 1519, the last year of its grandeur, it contained perhaps 200,000 to 250,000 people, with many more densely settled around the lake margin. (Seville, the port of departure for most of the conquistadores, numbered in the same year not more than 60,000 persons.) The city lived more by trade than tribute, but that trade had been stimulated and focused by war, just as its war-fed splendor attracted the most skilled artisans and most gifted singers to embellish its glory further. The one-class society of the early days of hardship had given way to an elaborately differentiated hierarchy. But that hierarchy had been created through the distribution of the spoils of war, and success in combat remained its dynamic. Performance on the field of battle was as central for the confirmation of an elevated position as for escape from a lowly one, and concern regarding that performance gripped young males of all social ranks. It also concerned those who directed the city. From the age of seven or eight all commoner youths save those few dedicated to the priesthood came under the control of the "House of Youth," the warrior house in their own calpulli [lineage group]. These were not exclusively military schools: each lad was expected to master a range of masculine skills, most particularly the trade of his father. The great mass of Aztec warriors were essentially part-time, returning from campaigns to the mundane pursuits of farming, hunting or fishing, pulque brewing and selling, or the dozen other trades the city supported. Few commoners were so successful in battle as to emancipate themselves entirely from such labor. Nonetheless it was war and the prospect of war

which fired imagination and ambition. At fifteen the lads began intensive training in weapon-handling, gathering every evening in the warrior house with the mature warriors—local heroes—to learn the chants and dances which celebrated warriors past and the eternal excitements of war. Assigned labors became a chance to test strength, as boys wrestled logs from the distant forest to feed the never-dying fires in their local temple or to meet their ward's obligations at the central temple precinct. But war provided the crucial and indeed the sole consequential test. Performance in that test was measured in a quite straightforward, arithmetical kind of way. Movement through the ranks of the warrior grades depended on taking alive on the field of battle a specified number of captives of specified quality. Each promotion was marked by the award of designated insignia and by a distinctive cutting and arranging of the hair, although the "warrior lock," at the center and slightly to the back of the head, was always kept intact. (Some of the most elevated warriors, the "shaven-headed Otomi," kept only that lock, bound with bright cord close to the scalp so that it floated banner-like above the shaven pate.) It was possible for the commoner who distinguished himself over several campaigns to graduate into the lower ranks of the royal administration, or even to enjoy the perquisites of lordship, at least for his lifetime. . . .

The conditions of warrior training for the sons of the lords are less clear.... It was probably significantly more rigorous. For a noble in the later years of empire the cost of cowardice was high. Access to office and the perquisites of office—its tribute fields, its dependent laborers—depended on adequate performance in battle, and the higher the office the more spectacular the required performance.. . .

A dramatic toughening in the required warrior performance for the nobility had come in the middle years of the rule of Moctezuma the Elder, just before the Aztec expansion beyond the valley. Tlacaélel, a young general under Itzcoatl, adviser of Moctezuma and to three rulers after him, and chief architect and strategist of empire, made the new rules clear. The most coveted jewels, the richest cloaks and shields could no longer be bought in the marketplace. They could be purchased only with valorous deeds. Any male who failed to go to war, even if he were the king's son, would be deprived of all signs of rank and would live as a despised commoner, while great warriors would eat from the king's dish. This was a sufficiently crucial matter to breach the hardening divisions of class: should a legitimate son prove cowardly, and the son of a slave or servant excel him in battle, the bastard would replace the coward as legitimate heir. Furthermore Tlacaélel proclaimed the initiation of a particular kind of warfare against five precariously independent provinces across the mountains—provinces noted, as were the Aztecs, for the toughness of their fighting men. In these so-called "Flowery Wars" the sole end would be the mutual taking of warrior captives for ritual killing. At the same time Tlacaélel was preparing the

great campaigns of subjugation which would bring hundreds, even thousands, of prisoners to Tenochtidan. The building of the Great Temple was already in train. In the next years the Aztecs were to become notorious among their neighbors for the mass ceremonial killings, and for the extravagant theatricalism in which those killings were framed. . . . They were intended as the most efficacious of political acts; the most direct demonstration of the high legitimacy of Aztec supremacy....

The declarations made in that theater of dominance were understood by the Aztecs' neighbors, although few found them permanently compelling, as Cortes was to discover to his advantage. But in the Aztec politics of spectacle the great ceremonies which consumed so great a part of the fruits of war constituted the final, necessary and consummatory act of war; they transformed human victory into sacred destiny.

AZTECS WERE NOT soldiers, at least not in the modern European sense. . . . They had no organized "army," nor officers either. But the Aztec warrior, like the European soldier, was a social product: it should be possible to discover how he was made. He faced, again and again, the threat of injury or death deliberately inflicted: it should be possible to discover something of how that threat appeared to him. And, a man trained to violence, he moved constantly in and out of civilian society; it should be possible to discover how he made that passage. The benefits of warrior action and warrior status were manifest, and not all material. What concerns me now is to count the costs of Aztec courage.

There was, of course, the obvious and familiar cost of war: the grief attending the death of a loved father, son, husband, brother, friend,... The kin had been well disciplined for the relinquishment. Childbed was conventionally

designated a battlefield, where a woman could "take a captive" by capturing a baby. The midwife greeted the birth of a male child with war cries and a formal exhortation, addressed to the child, but directed, of course, to the panting, newly delivered mother, who was emphatically not given the baby to hold:

My precious son, my youngest one . . . heed, hearken: thy home is not here, for thou art an eagle, a jaguar . . . here is only the place of thy nest . . . out there thou has been consecrated . . . War is thy desert, thy task. Thou shall give drink, nourishment, food to the sun, lord of the earth ... perhaps thou wilt receive the gift, perhaps thou wilt merit death by the obsidian knife ... The flowered death by the obsidian knife [that is, death on the killing stone].

A sufficiently explicit intervention by society in a zone we might consider private. It was the parents who then formally dedicated the infant to war, presenting him to the "Rulers of Youth" at the local warrior house, where he would live from puberty to marriage. . . .

If success had its negative aspects... failure could be a lifetime of bitterness. One strength of the Aztec system was that it was not necessary to succeed to survive: it was possible to live by one's own labor, saved from want by periodic handouts from the tribute warehouse or from a successful neighbor or kinsman. But failure was public, publicly marked, at an age when such marks burn deep. From about ten each lad grew a long lock of hair at the nape of the neck, which remained uncut until he had participated in the taking of a captive on the field of war. If after two or three campaigns he still had not forced himself to enter the fray—and it was always possible to hang back—he was thrown out of the warrior house, his head shaven in a tonsure to dramatize the loss of the warrior lock and to prepare him for the carrying pad of humble labor: forever a peripheral man. . . .

Aztec combat was highly individualistic, and depended utterly on the courage of the individual. For his first venture into war the fledgling warrior went only as an observer, to "carry the shield" of an experienced warrior whose technique he was to study. On his second time out he was expected to participate in a group capture: up to six novices could combine to drag a warrior down. The body of the victim of the joint assault was later exquisitely portioned out: torso and right thigh to the major captor, left thigh to the second; right upper arm to the third; left upper arm to the fourth; right forearm to the fifth; and left forearm to the sixth. With that initial capture, cooperation was at an end: from that time on the youth was in direct competition with his peers, as he searched through the dust-haze and the mind-stunning shrieking and whistling to identify and engage with an enemy warrior of equal, or preferably just higher, status. The nice portioning out of the first captive sug-

gests that even there in-group ranking was more important than any notion of team spirit.

The lads of each warrior house had lived and trained together, and we could expect some camaraderie to have developed. Discipline within the houses was maintained by a kind of extreme prefect system, with peers set to watch peers and to punish delinquents with savage beatings, or with the searing from the head of the treasured warrior lock. Would male bonding have survived all that—or, perhaps, thrived on it? Certainly sentiment toward one's companions on the field of battle was firmly and officially discouraged. To go to the aid of a threatened comrade would probably provoke a charge of having tried to steal his captive, and not only the false claiming of a captive, but the giving of one's captive to another, was punishable by death. ...

It was on that field of battle that the Aztec aesthetic of war could be most perfectly displayed and most profoundly experienced; and here "aesthetic" must be understood to comprehend moral and emotional sensibilities. Glimpses in both the painted and written sources suggest that combat was initiated by a formal rhetoric of gesture, with a "presentation stance" of the dub arm dropped and the body in a half-crouch. Since each warrior had an interest in not damaging his opponent too severely, there being no honor to be won by killing in the field, and a maimed man being useless for the most engrossing rituals, it is likely there was an initial preference for using the flat side of the club to stun, resorting to the cutting edges only when faced with a singularly difficult antagonist.

The action, when it came, was very fast: the clubs, although heavy, were handy. Even against the quite unfamiliar bulk and speed of a Spanish horseman native warriors could calculate their blows for maximum effectiveness through a remarkable combination of speed, strength,

balance, and timing. The aim was to stun or sufficiently disable one's opponent so that he could be grappled to the ground and subdued. ...

The dramatic shape of the combat, its "style," was poised stillness exploding into violent action. Aztecs described the two creatures most closely associated with warriors in the following terms: "the eagle is fearless... it can gaze into, it can face the sun ... it is brave, daring, a wingbeater, a screamer . . ." The lordly jaguar, "cautious, wise, proud... reserved," if troubled by a hunter first seats itself, casually deflecting the flying arrows, and then "stretches, stirs . . . and then it springs." And so dies the hunter. . .

Explosions of anger, paralyzing eruptions of rage, transformations from the stillness of perfect control to furious violence—great Aztec warriors would seem to be uncomfortable people to be with. And lesser warriors had less control. Young men kept at a pitch for war and trained to a style of touchy arrogance were hard to maintain peaceably in a city. To an outsider there was a startling incidence of violence tolerated within Aztec society, much of it generated from the young men in the warrior houses. So-called "ritual combats" ... raged through the streets.... On those occasions, ordinary people had to do their best to keep out of the way. On other occasions—playful occasions, but Aztecs had very rough notions of play—the townsfolk were themselves the victims, likely to be despoiled of their cloaks, or intimidated into offering "tribute" to a squad of young men. . . .

So, it would seem, society strove to contain and limit the undesired costs of courage by a determined effort to impose order on the unruly men of war. Penal codes were savage, with swift and violent retribution laid down for all socially disruptive acts, from drinking and adultery to theft and extortion, and the higher the rank the more strenuous the punishment. Public rhetoric insisted on the virtues of humility, modesty, frugality, and self-control.... These recommendations were made in a society which rewarded its warriors with the opportunity to bask in public adulation.... On the one hand we have high and gaudy rewards for aggression: on the other, formal denunciations of aggressive behaviour and of personal vanity. Is this simply a "contradiction," the manifestation of the strain imposed on a society avid for the material rewards of empire but unprepared for its social costs, and so developing rhetoric of control to net a violent reality of its own making?

So to see it is to miss the opportunity to explore Aztec understandings of violence, and the deeper bonds between warrior and society. The most extreme forms of violence were, after all, officially imported into the city, in the great killing rituals which marked the most collective occasions. Nor were these remote top-of-the-pyramid affairs. The victims, living and dead, were endlessly moved about the neighbourhoods; in one festival the lieutenant of Huitzilopochtli [the patron deity of the Aztecs, associated with war and conquest] ran through the streets slaughtering slaves staked out like goats along

his way; in the Feast of the Flaying of Men . . . men in newly flayed human skins skirmished through the streets—and then went on to penetrate individual houses. . . .

A simple notion of the unforeseen and undesired consequences of military expansion will not penetrate far into [the nature of violence in Aztec society]. Only through the glass of ritual, smoky and obscure as that glass is, do we have much chance of discerning how violence, on the field of battle and off it, was understood, and how warrior and civilian society cohered.

. . . WITH THE FIRST gathering of the agricultural harvest and the onset of the frosts the Aztec season of war began. Eighty days after that harvest, the first crop of warrior captives was killed, and eighty days after that, as the first signs of spring indicated the beginning of the planting season, came the Feast of the Flaying of Men. It was an important festival in that its first two days and all the evenings of the twenty days to follow required the attendance of those in authority in Tenochtitlan. It starred the warriors, especially the great warriors, and it honored Xipe Totec, the Flayer or the Flayed One, who was associated with the east, a zone of plenty, and with the early spring, and who was represented by a priest wearing a flayed human skin, and a mask of a flayed human face.

The first day of the festival saw the killing of the less important war captives. The victims, decked in elaborate regalia, were brought from the local warrior houses in which they had been kept, tended and displayed since their capture, and delivered by their captors to the priests waiting at the foot of Xipe's pyramid in the main temple precinct. Ideally they were meant to go leaping up the steps of the pyramid, shouting the chants of their city as they went, and some did: others had to be dragged up by the priests. At the top, before the shrine, they were flipped on their backs over a small upright stone, a priest securing each limb, while a fifth priest struck

open the chest with a flint knife, took out the heart, and raised it toward the sun. The body was sent hurtling and tumbling down the stairs to be collected at the bottom by old men from the appropriate ward temple, where they carried it to be flayed and dismembered, probably by the captor. One thigh was reserved to Moctezuma, the other and most of the rest of the body going to the captor, who summoned his kin to a feast at his house. There, amid weeping and lamentations, the kinsmen of the captor each ate a small piece of flesh served with a dish of "dried" (unsoftened?) maize kernels. The captor himself, whose splendid captor's regalia had been replaced by the white chalk and feathers which marked the victim destined for the killing stone, did not participate in the feast.

The killings at the pyramid went on for much of the day. It is difficult to establish the numbers usually killed—presumably that varied according to the fortunes of war—but perhaps sixty or so died. . . . But it is what happened later on that second day which seems to have been the most compelling sequence in the whole complex affair. It also involved a mode of killing specially identified with the Aztecs, revived in Tenochtitlan to mark the victory of Moctezuma the Elder over the Huastecs.

For this ritual only the greatest captives were selected, their captors being accordingly the more honored. The victims were chosen to die on what the Spaniards later dubbed the gladiatorial stone, at the base of Xipe's pyramid. They had been rehearsed for the occasion. Their captors had presented them to the people in a sequence of different regalias over the preceding four days, at the place where they were to die. There they were forced to engage in mock combats, and then to submit to a mock heart excision, the "hearts" being made of unsoftened maize kernels. The night before their deaths they spent in vigil with the captors, their warrior lock being cut and taken at midnight. Then early in the afternoon of that second day of Xipe's festival they were marshaled close to the stone, their captors still beside them, before assembled dignitaries and as many other people as could fit into the temple precinct, as four of the greatest Aztec warriors, two from the order of Jaguar warriors, two from the order of Eagles, presented their weapons in dedication to the sun. Then down from Xipe's pyramid came in procession the high priest of Xipe Totec in the regalia of his lord, followed by the other high priests as representatives of their deities, to take their seats around the gladiatorial stone. This was a performance worthy of the contemplation of the gods.

The stone was about waist high, and a meter and a half wide, but set on an elevated platform about the height of a man. The first victim, now stripped of his regalia and clad only in a loincloth, was given a draught of "obsidian wine"—pulque, the Aztec alcoholic drink, probably spiked with a drug from

their ample pharmacopoeia—and tethered by the waist to a rope fastened at the center of the stone. He was presented with weapons; four pine cudgels for throwing, and a war club. The club was studded not with flint or obsidian blades, but with feathers. Then the first Jaguar warrior, equipped with a real club, advanced and engaged him in combat.

There must have been a system of timing of rounds or of counting passes or exchanges, although it is not recorded, because exceptionally fine fighters were sometimes able to survive the assaults of all four warriors. In those cases a fifth warrior, a left-hander, was brought into play to bring him down. When he was down, the lord Xipe advanced, struck open the breast and cut out the heart, which was raised "as a gift" to the sun, and then placed in the eagle vessel in which it would be later burned. The priest then submerged a hollow cane in the blood welling in the chest cavity, and raised the cane, so, as it was said, "giving the sun to drink." The captor was given the cane and a bowl of the blood which he carried throughout the city, daubing the blood on the mouths of the stone idols in all the temples. The circuit completed, he went to Moctezuma's palace to return the magnificent regalia of he who offers a victim at the gladiatorial stone, and from there went back to his local temple to flay and dismember his captive's body. And then, later in the day, he watched his lamenting kin eat the maize stew and the flesh of his captive, while they wept for their own young warrior. He did not participate, saying "Shall I perchance eat my very self?" Meanwhile at the foot of Xipe's pyramid other victims had been tethered to the stone, and had fought and died. At the end of the day, when the last of the victims had been dispatched, the priests performed a dance with the severed heads, which were then skewered on the skull rack beside the stone.

It is obvious even from this sketchy account that a great many things were going on, but I want to focus on what was understood to be happening on the



actual stone. There are a thousand ways of killing a man, but why tether him to a stone, restricting his movements but giving him the advantage of height? Why arm him with a club, a formidable weapon in its weight and reach, but with its effectiveness reduced by the replacement of its cutting blades with feathers? And why, given this finely calculated inequality, did the victim cooperate? It was clearly imperative that he fight, and fight as well as he was able: for this ritual only warriors from tribes fully participant in Aztec understandings of war were chosen. He could not fight for his life, for that was forfeit. Why then?

He, like his Aztec counterparts, had been long prepared. From his earliest days those who spoke for society had made his mission plain: to give the sun the hearts of enemies, and to feed the insatiable earth with their bodies. Every lad training in the warrior houses knew that access to the warrior paradise in the House of the Sun was restricted to those who died in either of two ways: on the field of battle, where death was rare, given that the end of combat was the taking of captives, or on the killing stone. That death he had to strive to desire, or at least to embrace. Just as only ritual action made "victory" from the outcome of battle, so for the individual warrior action on the field of battle was consummated only later, and ritually. Behind the desperate excitements of battle lay the shadow of the killing stone, and a lonely death among strangers. This is why the captor, in the midst of the adulation accorded him for having taken a victim for the sun, wore at the cannibal feast of his kin the chalk and down of the victim; why the kin lamented; why he could not eat of what was indeed his "own flesh," for he too, ideally, would die on the stone, and his flesh be eaten in another city. In the rhetoric of Aztec ideology the battlefield was as much a sacred space as the temple precinct—or as much as human confusions and the

terrible contingency of war permitted. But it was only on the stone that the meaning of the death could be made manifest.

To be overcome in battle was not fortuitous: it was the sign that the warrior was a warrior no longer, and had begun the transition to victim. From the moment of the seizing of the warrior lock his separation from the ordinary world began. The "rehearsals," as we might cynically call them—the garments changed again and again, the mock combats at the stone, the mock heart excisions—all marked his passage to increased sacredness. Then, with the taking of his warrior lock of hair, "the eagle man was taken upwards"—that is, the warrior made his flight to the sun: before his physical death the individual was extinguished, the transition completed. It was as victim that he watched other men from his city, men he had known when they were alive, fight and die on the stone, until it was his turn for a last display of maximum valor, the exemplary passionate acceptance of his fate. And if he died well his praises would be sung in the warrior houses of his home place.

The deeper fascination [of] that combat was the most comprehensive metaphor for Aztec understanding of how human society, the world and the cosmos worked. The endless repetitious struggles between the natural elements were endlessly replicated in the ritual ball game, in the mock combats which studded the ritual cycle, and in this most solemn contest on the gladiatorial stone.

The victims were called "the striped ones," and the action on the stone "the striping." What the assailants strove to do was not to club or to stun, but to wound delicately; to slit the skin with an obsidian blade so that blood would spring forth. Xipe, who himself wore a human skin, represented the early spring, when the husk of the seed must be pierced if the sprouting life within is to break through, and when the winter-hardened skin of the earth is pierced by the new growth. Certainly the offerings bestowed on the skin-wearers—the garlands of

flowers and the necklaces of maize ears—make the agricultural connection plain. But the most important aspect and the dominant meaning of "the striping" for those who performed and for those who watched was the effusion of warrior blood. ...

Spaniards and the Europeans who came after them have presented an urban-imperial image of Tenochtitlan, with its splendid hierarchies of priests and warriors and its whole sections of artisans and merchants. But it was a city green with growing things, banked with the chinampas, the ingenious system of shallow-water agriculture which had brought the Aztecs their first prosperity. The bulk of the population were not agriculturalists, but those specialist artisans and priests and warriors lived in a vegetable-growers' world, and the centrality of agriculture to their lives could not have been in doubt.

The chinampas required men's exquisite manipulations of earth, seeds, sun and water in an alchemy of vegetable abundance. It was highly precise cultivation, its small stages laid out from when each seed in its individual block of earth, covered against frost, watered by hand, was raised until it was brought to sprout, and then transferred to the only slightly less intensive cultivation of the chinampa. The chinampa itself was formed by the piling of thick mats

of water weed, which provided a fibrous, permeable, and slowly composting base for the rich silt dredged up from the lake bottom. More water could be scooped up at need....

I would argue . . . that the chinampas not only made Tenochtitlan experientially an agricultural city, and that the plants so raised provided essential ritual equipment—models of what was to come—for ceremonies designed to influence growth in the open fields, but that those highly visible chinampa manipulations provided the model for men's part in the natural order, and for their role in aiding the growth of essential foods. In the Feast of the Flaying of Men, when the chinampa city turned from the business of war to the growing of things, those manipulations of earth, water, sun, and seed through which men found their sustenance were explored through the symbolic medium of the human body, and the interdependence between agriculturalist and warrior set out.

Aztecs called human blood, most particularly human blood deliberately shed, "most precious water." They understood it to be a non-renewable resource, so its value was enhanced. It was thought to have extraordinary fertilizing power. The creation myths, confused and contradictory as they might be on the role of particular "deities," pivot on the creative efficacy of shed blood, as when the great darkness which preceded this Fifth Sun was dispersed only when a little pustular god threw himself into the fire, to be transformed into the Sun. But the Sun only came to move—that is to be alive—when the other gods had spilled their blood, some voluntarily, others unwillingly. A singularly terrifying creation story, and the one most often assumed in Nahuatl texts,

tells of the gods Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca gazing down on the great earth monster swimming in the primeval waters. They went down and seized her by her giant limbs, and wrenched her body in half, one part forming the sky, the other the earth. Then the other gods descended, and from her hair they created trees, flowers, and herbs; from her skin, grass and flowers; from her eyes, wells, springs, and small caverns; from her mouth, rivers and large caves; from her nose mountain valleys; from her shoulders, mountains. This terrible creature cried out in the night and refused to bring forth fruit until she was soaked in human blood and fed with human hearts. When satisfied, she brought forth the plants which provide man's sustenance. It is she who is obsessively represented on the underside of the ritual vessels designed to receive human blood and hearts. Whatever icons they bear on their upper surfaces, whatever great forces they invoke, underneath she is there, her insatiable maw wide open, great claws at elbows and knees, in the squatting position Aztec women adopted to give birth.

So much, for the moment, for blood. Consider now the experience which participation in the gladiatorial ritual brought the captor. The conventional rewards for the warrior were public adulation, the presentation of insignia by the ruler, gifts of capes, flowers, tobacco pipes, which could then be proudly displayed. For many evenings after Xipe's festival young warriors gathered to adorn themselves and to dance before Moctezuma's palace. Sometimes Moctezuma himself, flanked by the other two rulers of the Triple Alliance, came dancing slowly out through the gates to join them: the might of the Aztec empire on display. Later came more exuberant dancing with the women of the city.

From all that festivity the captor was excluded. For all those days he and his kin were in a state of penance, eating meagerly, prohibited from washing, living secluded from the ordinary pleasures. For those days he was engaged in a different zone. The

young man he had captured had been close to him in age, aspirations, prowess. He had tended him through the days before the ceremony, through his unmaking as the warrior, his making as the victim. And he had watched his captive's performance in an agony of identification: it was his own prowess being tested there on the stone. Then came a different intimacy, as he flayed the young body he had known in life and saw youths who sought to participate in his glory clamber into the dank skin. In a society which passionately valued cleanliness and treasured sweet scents, he and his kin had to live in a stench of corruption for the full twenty days. Then, at the end of the period of penance, he struggled for the last time into the crumbling, stinking shroud, to experience its transformation, its slow turning into matter, until, like the pierced casing of the maize seed, it was cast off and sealed away in a cave at the base of Xipe's pyramid, and so returned to the earth.

The explosion of relief which followed the casting off of the skins—the great cleansing and washing, initially with cornmeal to get off the grease, and then a sequence of progressively more playful and rowdy re-enactments of the festival—suggests the strain for those warriors "privileged" to be taken through the ritual glass to confront what lies on the other side of the adulation, the tobacco pipes, the plumes, the grand display. Just as the captive was rehearsed at the stone, so his captor rehearsed through those days his own death and decay; for the transformation of his own flesh into vegetable matter. The Nahuatl word *tonacayotl* means "things of the sun's warmth," that is, the fruits of the earth. It is also used metaphorically to mean "our flesh." When the kin took into their mouths the morsels of human flesh and the stew of dried maize kernels—maize in its least modified form—the lesson they were being taught was that the two substances, perceptually so different, were of the same stuff, although at different points in the cycle. While we transmute bread and wine into flesh and blood, reflecting the centrality of man in our cosmology, they saw human flesh and human blood as transmuted into sacred maize and sacred water. Our "man is dust and will be dust again" focuses on the pathos of the brief reign of the flesh: for them man's flesh has been, is and will be again part of the vegetable cycle. (Maize was the only deity always represented in the terms of a natural human biography.) The Flayed Lord Xipe Totec sang of the identity of the tender maize and the warrior flesh it would become:

I am the tender corn Of jade
my heart is made The gold of
rain I'll see My heart will be
refreshed The fledgling man
grow firm The man of war be
born.

The "man of war" was Cinteotl, Young Lord Maize Cob, who would at his harvesting at the end of the agricultural season lead his warriors out to war. The body of the warrior captive was disassembled with extraordinary care, and allocated very deliberately: the warrior lock to the captor; the heart, the "precious Eagle Cactus fruit," offered to the Sun; the blood to give drink to the Sun and all the stone images; the skin to be worn through all the days of the festival, and then laid away; the flesh to the captor's kin and to Moctezuma; the head skewered on the skull rack. Further, the thighbone, scraped or boiled clean of flesh, was draped with the captive's warrior jacket and victim's heron plume and set up as a sacred object in the courtyard of the captor. Only small parts of that so careful disassembling had to do with the human and social world. ...

[The Florentine Codex describes blood as] "Our blood, our redness, our liquid, our freshness, our growth, our life blood ... it wets the surface ... it strengthens one ... one is greatly strengthened..." Blood vessels are likened to reeds. The analogies between the movement of blood through the flesh and that of water through the earth are vivid. The description of the heart relates it closely to the sun: it is "round, hot, that by which there is existence. It makes one live. . . ." [There is also some evidence in myth that bone was identified with seed.]...

What we have in that careful analysis of the human body, an analysis at once physical and conceptual, is the setting out in terms of its components of those elements the Aztecs saw as being manipulated in chinampa agriculture, and which they identified as those which made up the world: human flesh being equated with maize, vegetable foods and the earth itself; human blood with rain and flowing water; the human heart with the sun's heat; and (this less confidently) human bone with seed. Note that this analysis was performed upon the body of a great warrior. While the same essential understanding

must have informed all accounts of the relationship between the human and the natural order, the Aztecs, specialists in warfare, chose to render it most explicitly when dramatizing the unobvious but crucial connection between the feats of warriors and the food of men.

Notions of an afterlife have their place here. Aztecs understood that men who died by water-related accident or disease returned to a springtime world with Tlaloc, He who Makes Things Sprout, and who manifests himself in rain and the mountains. . . . Babies who died so young that they had not been committed to this world were buried by the grain bins, and thought to have returned, still unblemished, from whence they came. Those who died in battle (including women dead in childbirth) and those who died on the killing stone went to a warrior paradise. And all others, regardless of rank, traveled for four bitter and bleak years through the increasingly chill nine layers of the underworld until they arrived at the lowest level, presented their gifts to the Death Lord, and dissolved into Nothingness—or, rather, into Everything, for "there is our common home, there is our common place of perishing; there, there is an enlarging of the earth where forever it [the individual life] hath ended. . . ." After that four-year journey, the "person" had quite gone. For all of the four years kin made offerings of garments and equipment to ease the pains of the journey: the journey completed and the four years passed, the ceremonies ceased... .

There was nothing "personal" in the relationship between men and those powers which, for want of a better term, we call by the altogether misleading word "gods".... There is a growing consensus that what Aztecs meant by all these names and images was the invocation of different aspects of relatively few great natural forces or principles, and a commentary on the relationships between them—as when Earth was addressed as Our Grandmother, Mother of the Sacred Ones, She who Eats our Filth, Heart of the Earth, Mother of our Sustenance, and so on. Aztec sculpture (like the Aztec language and like the construction of ritual objects) exhibits the same compiling mode whereby icons, most of the sturdily naturalistic representations of hearts, flowers, skulls, serpents, are compiled into remarkably abstract commentaries on the nature of things: a kind of metaphysical poetry in stone.

The great forces thus invoked and reflected upon had no engagement with man, with one exception. The exception was Tezcatlipoca, invoked as the Night Wind, the Enemy on Both Sides, the Youth, the Lord of the Close Vicinity. He was arbitrary, the personification of capricious power, coming among men from time to time to wreak casual havoc and dispense casual rewards. He was associated with sorcerers, who injure men wantonly and by stealth, and with the jaguar, with its superb annihilating power. He was also the deity associated with human rulership. Neither with him, nor with the more abstract natural elements, was there any hint of a contract. There was instead a key word in

Nahuatl, *tequii*, which can be roughly translated as "debt," "levy" or "tribute," but carrying with it a strong implication of what we might call "vocation," being applied to the whole-hearted performance of one's obligatory occupation in the world. It was used most insistently, however, to describe the offerings made of one's own blood, in the routine daily offerings, or on the battlefield or the killing stone. Only in those places did the individual wholly and completely pay his or her "debt." But all forms of the payment were penitential, and some grievously so. In a great warrior festival midway through the season of war, a representation of *Huitzilopochtli* was molded out of a rich dough of maize and seeds. . . . It was killed by a blow to its vegetable heart in the presence of all the military chiefs, and the heart presented to the ruler. Each year the body was divided in rotation between the paired warrior houses in Tenochtitlan and the sister but subordinate city of Tlatelolco. All the members of the two warrior houses ate a fragment of the dough. The ingestion initiated a year of such strenuous penance and obligation that men were driven to pawn their land or their labor, or even to seek a once-for-all settlement of their "debt" through death in battle rather than endure it to the end.

To eat the flesh of *Huitzilopochtli* was a heavy thing. Thus the young warriors began to learn the lesson—a lesson only to be learnt in the ritual zone, not on the field of battle—of what it was to be a warrior. The lesson took time to learn, and had been learnt best by those who had risen to eminence and so, for example, had had the dark experience of offering a captive at the gladiatorial stone. The rough exuberance of the warrior youth gave way to sedate melancholy for those who knew how fleeting were the pleasures of this life, its riches, its public acclaim, and how heavy the burden of humanity. The tempo and dramatic structuring of the ritual at the gladiatorial stone, as of many other Aztec rituals, reiterated the same understanding. . . . The Aztecs characterized their universe as composed of heavens above and underworlds below this seen world, those heavens and underworlds being stable and enduring. This layer,

Tlalticpactli, "on earth," the layer manifest to the senses, they characterized as chronically unstable, and called it "that which changes." That understanding of the fragility of the perceived world, and of human arrangements within it, could be dramatized by making human statuses uncertain: the triumphant warrior does not display his status as his captive fights there on the stone; he strives to achieve it afresh. That constant challenge and testing structured all the hierarchies.

The deliberate insertion into ritual of the problematical and the unpredictable, like the capriciousness attributed to the sole interventionist god *Tezcatlipoca*, spoke of the uncertainty of the things of this world. Ephemerality made those things the more treasured. Aztec "lyric poetry" strikes an easy and mistaken response from the European reader, with its pretty imagery of falling flowers and misty patios (in Aztec reality, images of death on the stone). But the elegiac "where have all the flowers gone?" note is correctly recognized. Only briefly were men warmed by the sun in this world, between the dark and the dark. The particular beauties which most profoundly moved them—the shimmer of feathers, the shaped sounds of a chanted poem, the scent of a flower, the translucence of fragile jade—were moving precisely because they were as ephemeral as the lives of men.

"Courage," in such a context, becomes a complex notion. There seem to have been two kinds of bravery recognized in the Aztec fighting man which, although touched by the connotations of class, were far from exhausted by them. One was the attribute of those warriors like the "shorn ones" or the "shaven-headed Otomi" who hurled themselves heedlessly into the fray. Such men were richly rewarded and highly valued. But they were not accorded positions of authority, nor unqualified social approval. In one of the great homilies in which a father instructs his son in correct and controlled social demeanor, the "so-called furious in war" who goes "foolishly" encountering his death is classified along with the down and buffoon as one who understands nothing and lives for vanities and acclaim. He knows no fear because he has no knowledge. Admiration is reserved for the warrior who is morally informed; who understands his obligation. He will go humbly and quietly in this world, watchful, prudent; but when the Earth Lord *Tlatecuhtli* stirs, "openeth his mouth, parteth his lips," when the flame of war is kindled, he will be ready. The same great prayer to *Tezcatlipoca* which acknowledges the anguish of the bereaved kinsfolk also acknowledges that anguish of the true warriors, "those who suffer pain, who suffer torment in their hearts" and ask that they be given their only release, their only ease—the final encounter with *Tezcatlipoca*:

Show him the marvel. May his heart not falter in fear. May he desire, may he long for the flowery death by the obsidian knife. May he savor the scent, savor the freshness, savor the sweetness of the darkness . . . Take his part. Be his friend.

And this to the "Enemy on Both Sides."

When we hear an official rhetoric of acute self-control, and watch scenes

of extraordinary public violence, we are not confronting some unresolved social dilemma of how to enjoy the profits of military expansion without having to bear with socially disruptive warriors. Aztec rhetoric and Aztec ritual were unified in the endeavor to sustain a social order sufficiently in harmony with the natural order to survive within it. To describe as "violence" the deliberate sequence of bloody acts which we see brought into the frame and focus of ritual action is to assume that their point lay in their destructiveness. But the crucial understandings which grounded those killings and slow dismemberings were that human flesh and maize—"maize" as metonym for all vegetable sustenance—were the same matter in different transformations; that the transformations were cyclic, and the cycles constantly in jeopardy; and that men's actions played a part recognized as small but, given the delicacy of the balance, always potentially decisive in maintaining the sequence of those transformations, and so men's slight purchase on existence.

They were bleak understandings, reducing men to objects, and declaring human society to be peripheral, important only to itself. It took courage enough, and long years of training, to accept them.