

(Excerpted from: Everyday Life of the Aztecs, Warwick Bray, New York :Peter Bedrick Books, 1991.)

## **SOCIAL ORDER**

During the two centuries which had elapsed since the Aztecs migrated into the Valley of Mexico their social structure had undergone great changes. Their tribal chieftain had been transformed into a semi-divine king, and from the time of Montezuma I (1440-68) the politicians had deliberately encouraged class distinctions. The first clause in Montezuma's law code states quite baldly that 'The king must never appear in public unless the occasion is extremely important', and throughout Mexican society a man's status in the community depended on his rank. There were plenty of offices to be filled, for the growth of Tenochtitlan had been accompanied by the development of a civil service with many grades of official(21). These words of Fray Diego Duran, although written in the sixteenth century about pre-Conquest Mexico, have an all too familiar ring about them:

The nation had a special official for every activity, small though it were. Everything was so well recorded that no detail was left out of the accounts. There were even officials in charge of sweeping. The good order was such that no one dared to interfere with the job of another or express an opinion since he would be rebuffed immediately. . . . And so the officials of the Republic were innumerable.

### *The ruling classes*

At the apex of the social pyramid was the ruler himself, set apart from the people by his wealth and authority, and separated from them by a barrier of courtly ritual. Even his most important subordinates were kept at a distance, and Bernal Diaz has left this account of the way in which the captains of the royal bodyguard entered the king's presence:

They were obliged to take off their rich cloaks and put on others of little value. They had to be clean and to enter barefoot, with their eyes downcast, for they were not allowed to look him in the face. And they had to make him three obeisances, saying as they came towards him, 'Lord, my Lord, my great Lord!' Then when they had

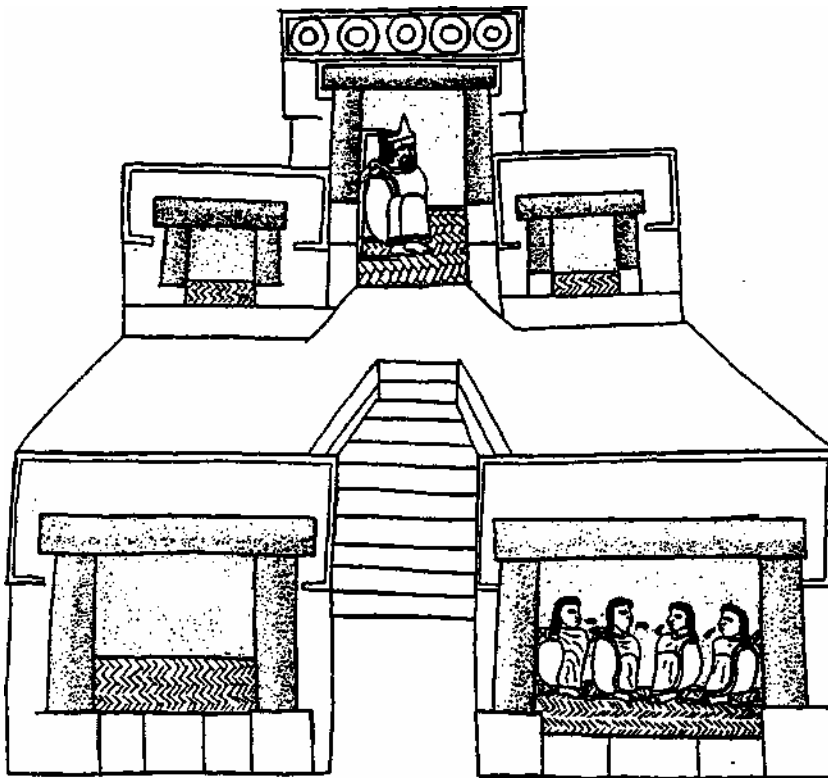
made their report, he would dismiss them with a few words. They did not turn their backs as they went out, but kept their faces towards him and their eyes to the ground, turning round only when they had left the room.

When the king travelled, his litter was carried on the shoulders of noblemen.

The ruler of Tenochtitlan was commander-in-chief of the armies of the Triple Alliance, and also held the title of *tlatoani* (He Who Speaks). The Aztecs followed the custom of most of the Valley tribes in choosing their king by election, but from the time of Acamapichtli, first lord of Tenochtitlán, the ruler had always been chosen from a single family, though not always in the most direct line of descent.

In the days when the Aztecs were a small tribe it had been easy to test public opinion by consulting the heads of families, but by the sixteenth century this method had become too unwieldy and the electoral body had shrunk to about 100 people, drawn from the ranks of the nobility and the more important officials, priests, and warriors. No vote was taken, but the electors conferred among themselves and decided on an acceptable candidate who was then presented to the people to be approved by acclamation. There are no records of a refusal to accept the council's nominee. As a courtesy to the other rulers of the Alliance, the kings of Texcoco and Tlacopan were asked to confirm the appointment, and at the election of Tizoc in 1481 it was the lord of Texcoco who placed the turquoise diadem on the new ruler's head.

Election depended on merit, and the job of the council was to choose the most able person among the male relatives of the deceased ruler. The electors looked for a man who had proved his valour in battle, had a good record of public service, and was prudent and just in his conduct. In a polygamous society there was no lack of candidates, for a ruler normally had sons by several of his wives—not to mention the host of brothers, half-brothers, uncles, cousins, and other relatives who were also eligible for selection.



21 Montezuma's palace in Tenochtitlán (Codex Mendoza). On the upper terrace the ruler sits in his throne-room which is flanked by guest-rooms for allied chiefs. On the ground floor is the meeting-room of the war council (left) and of the judges and councillors (right)

Sometimes the choice fell on a son of the previous ruler. In theory the throne was offered to the most deserving candidate, but in practice there were all sorts of political factors to be considered. Powerful connections were always a help, and Chimalpopoca was elected ruler at the age of 10 or 11 largely because his mother was a daughter of Tezozomoc, lord of Azcapotzalco, to whom the Aztecs were paying tribute at the time. In the later period, when the Aztecs were the dominant power in Mexico, dynastic alliances became less important to them and the council elected a series of vigorous and successful men. Often the throne was occupied by several brothers in succession. On the death of Axayacatl in 1481 the office descended first to his brother Tizoc, and then to another brother, Ahuitzotl, before the direct line resumed in the person of Axayacatl's son, Montezuma II.

The ruler was assisted by a dignitary known as Ciuacoatl (Snake Woman),

who, despite this title, was a man, and who dealt with mundane affairs of government. He was president of the high court, served as deputy ruler in the king's absence, and acted as chairman of the electoral college whenever a king died. Below the Snake Woman in the hierarchy came the military commanders of the four wards into which Tenochtitlán was divided, and below them again the city council, which in theory had the right to make policy decisions although in practice it always bowed to the wishes of the ruler. In older and more democratic days the council members seem to have been the elected delegates of the clans, but by the time of the Conquest most councillors were nominated by the ruler.

The class which can be roughly translated as the 'nobility' was made up of high officials who included senior generals, heads of the various branches of the civil service, judges of the appeal court, rulers of conquered cities, governors of provincial towns and of the districts of Tenochtitlán. These men were lords by virtue of the offices they held, and not through birth or inheritance like the traditional European aristocracy. They may perhaps be compared with the Life Peers of the House of Lords. A *tecuhtli* paid no taxes, was given an official residence, and drew his income from lands pertaining to his office rather than his person. During his lifetime he bore all the insignia of his rank, and in conversation the ending *tzin* was added to his name as a mark of respect, in much the same way as we use expressions like 'Sir' or 'Your Worship'.

Unlike a hereditary lord, however, a *tecuhtli* could not be sure that his son would take over the office and all the benefits which went with it. The private family estates could indeed be passed down from father to son, but the public lands remained tied to the particular office and reverted to the king when an official died or retired. If there was a suitably qualified male relative in the family the job usually went to him, but the final decision lay with the ruler who could appoint anyone he thought fit.

Sons of *tecuhtli* belonged by right of birth to the lesser nobility, the *pilli*. Their aristocratic background and education gave them certain advantages (and it was among them that the ruler chose many of his officials), but wealth

and prestige came from rank rather than birth, and a *pilli* was expected to work as hard as anybody else. The frontier between the common people and the ruling class was easily crossed in both directions. A plebeian who distinguished himself by taking four captives in battle was given official rank and could aspire to high position; on the other hand, a *pilli* was expected to make his own way in the world, and if he did nothing outstanding in his lifetime he was not promoted to any official position and in consequence left his children neither honour nor wealth.

### *The common people*

Below the nobles and civil servants came the mass of the people, the free commoners, organized into *calpulli*, or hereditary clans. All members of a clan considered themselves related by descent from a common ancestor, usually a figure said to have lived at the time when the land was first occupied and divided among the people, and by the time of the Conquest there were 20 such clans in Tenochtitlán proper, plus those of Tlatelolco which was annexed in 1473.

The original clans may well have been kinship groups, but during two centuries of urban life the bonds of kinship had become less important than those of residence. The word *calpulli* means 'group of houses', and in the sixteenth century the clans were primarily landholding corporations each of which occupied its own ward of the city and also owned farmland which it distributed among clan members, allotting each family enough for its needs. Within the *calpulli*, families were grouped into units of 20 which were combined into major units of 100 households.

Superimposed on the clan system was a division of the city for administrative purposes into four great sectors. Each of these quarters housed several *calpulli* and was governed by a military chief who was appointed by the central authority and was generally a member of the royal family.

The *calpulli* were in many ways like modern parishes. Each clan maintained its own temple and school, and local affairs were dealt with by a council of clan elders which copied in miniature the structure of the central government. The head of the *calpulli* was elected by the members of the clan

and held office for life. It was his responsibility to distribute land, to make sure that the registers were kept up to date, to represent the clan in lawsuits, to pass on the commands of officials higher up the ladder, and to oversee the work of the minor clan officers who each looked after the labour and taxation of a few households.

The head of the clan was also president of the local council and had the dubious privilege of paying for the food and drink consumed at meetings. Since he was also responsible for entertaining visitors the expenses of his office could be high, but in compensation he paid no taxes and drew an income from lands tilled by his fellow clansmen. In more ancient times the head of a *calpulli* had been a powerful man, but under a centralized government he had become a minor cog in the administrative machine. Important matters were decided at city level, and only the most petty local business was entrusted to clan officials.

Two sections of the community, the *meyeques* and the slaves, were outside the clan structure altogether. The *meyeques*, who numbered about 30 per cent of the total population, were free men who belonged to the depressed class of landless peasants. Because they were not members of any clan they received no share in the distribution of farmland and gained no benefit from the welfare services of the *calpulli*. They were not slaves, nor were they full citizens. The origins of the *meyeques* are obscure, but since every Aztec born of free parents was automatically a member of his ancestral clan we must assume that many *meyeques* were of non-Aztec stock, perhaps newcomers to the Valley, or the descendants of conquered tribes. Others were free commoners who had lost their civil rights through debt or crime, and still others were the children of slaves who were born free but who inherited no clan rights.

#### *The slaves*

A *meyeque*, however miserable his condition, was at least a free man. A slave, on the other hand, was owned outright by his master and could be put to any kind of work at his master's pleasure. Female slaves were given jobs in the kitchens and in workshops where they wove cloth or made garments;

males worked in the fields, acted as house-servants, porters, and labourers. Although a slave received no pay, his lot was in many ways more comfortable than that of a landless peasant. We never hear of a prosperous *mayeque*, but a slave could always be sure of food and shelter, and—unlike a free man—escaped the twin burdens of military service and taxation. Many slaves rose to positions of responsibility, acting as overseers or estate managers, and Aztec law allowed them to acquire land, property, and even slaves of their own. There are many cases of a widow marrying one of her slaves, and it was not uncommon for a man to take a slave girl as a concubine. There was nothing shameful in such a union, and Itzcoatl, one of the greatest rulers of Tenochtitlán, was elected king even though his mother was a slave, and his father, Acamapichtli, had other sons by a noblewoman of the Colhuacán dynasty.

The principal slave market was in Azcapotzalco, where the trade was so well organized that the dealers were among-the richest of the merchants. Each dealer owned three or four buildings in the city, and there he housed his slaves until the day came to parade them, dressed in borrowed finery, before the crowd of buyers in the market square. Singers and drummers were hired for the occasion, and the slaves were made to display their skills in dancing and music. An ordinary slave with no special skills cost about 20 cotton mantles (no mean price, for a poor man could live for almost a year on that sum), but a good dancer could fetch 30 or even 40 mantles. When the bargaining was over, the dealer stripped off all the fine clothes and the purchaser replaced them with everyday wear before sending the slave to a wooden cage (23) where he waited until his new owner collected him.

Most of the slaves who reached the markets had come from distant lands, often outside Aztec territory. As part of their tribute some of the border cities were required to send slaves to Mexico, a demand which they satisfied by raiding their neighbours, the Tarascans, Mixtecs, Tlappanecs, and other tribes not subject to the Alliance. Other slaves were purchased by merchants in Tehuantepec or the towns of the Gulf Coast, and the laws make it clear that

stealing children for sale to slave-dealers was a profitable crime in the Aztec homeland as well as abroad.

A slave who got as far as the market had one last chance of regaining his freedom. If he could escape from the market place and reach the sanctuary of the ruler's palace he became a free man, and the law gave him a sporting chance by forbidding anybody except the owner or the owner's son to try and catch him. Any other person who interfered in the chase was punished by being enslaved himself.

Some slaves were criminals sentenced for theft or non-payment of debts. Others were voluntary slaves who had sold themselves in return for shelter and security. In this latter group were peasants whose crops had failed or who were unable to pay their taxes, but also less deserving characters, such as gamblers and drunkards, who were either too lazy to till their own fields or else had ruined themselves by extravagance. For all these people there was hope. Thieves were freed when they had repaid the value of the stolen goods, and any slave could buy his liberty by paying his master a sum equivalent to his purchase price. Often, too, slaves were freed when their master died.

In another form of voluntary slavery the contract was for the service itself rather than for the labour of one particular individual. In exchange for a loan a poor man might offer one of his sons as a slave, or a group of families might combine to promise a fixed amount of work in the fields or to offer one of their members as a household slave. Provided that these services were properly carried out it made little difference who actually did the job, and it often happened that after a few years of slavery the bondsman was replaced by a younger relative who served for a few years before handing over to somebody else in his turn. The children of slaves were free, and Aztec society had no class of hereditary serfs.

Even in the sixteenth century, when Aztec power was at its height, slaves were not numerous (perhaps about two per cent of the total population) and we are still a long way from the dependence on slave labour which characterized so many ancient civilizations of the Old World.



A Mexican slave, although he was his master's chattel, still kept a certain dignity as a person. The Aztec attitude may be summed up in the phrase, "There, but for the grace of God, go I," and the fortunate man tended to regard a slave as somebody who had been born under an unlucky sign and whose misfortune was caused as much by fate as by weakness. Slaves were an expensive investment, and even the Spanish chroniclers agree that they were well treated by their owners.

The sale of slaves was governed by law. A well-behaved slave could not be sold without his consent, but custom allowed a master to get rid of a slave who was dishonest, lazy, or disobedient. A heavy wooden collar was placed around the man's neck (22) and he was put up for sale again in the market. If this lesson did not teach him to mend his ways an even-greater danger awaited him. An incorrigible slave, who had had three owners and failed to satisfy any of them, forfeited all sympathy and could now be bought for sacrifice...