

Dark Religion? Aztec Perspectives on Human Sacrifice

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Mesoamerica's 'Dark' Image

No rite evokes so many stereotypes of 'pagan darkness' as human sacrifice. For seven thousand years¹ in every corner of Mesoamerica,² thousands of people were decapitated, stoned, drowned, burned, crushed to death or cut open to have their living hearts removed as part and parcel of religious festivals. This paper concentrates on the grandest manifestation of this tradition: Aztec human sacrifice. Necessarily, we will also ponder its broader Mesoamerican context.

Many Spanish estimates of the frequency of Aztec human sacrifice are now considered exaggerated.³ Nevertheless, early sources (namely, Diaz, Duran, Sahagun, and Cortes) give almost identical figures: each Aztec temple-complex dispatched two to six victims every twenty days. Thus, each Aztec town, 'even the most wretched villages',⁴ conducted forty to a hundred and twenty killings annually.⁵ For cities and special events such as centenaries

1 Even the earliest Mesoamerican quasi-farming cultures at Durrón and Coxcalton show evidence of sacrificial practices. See R. S. MacNesh and M. L. Fowler et al, *The Prehistory of Tehuacan Valley* Vol.5, (Austin, 1972) p84 and Robert D. Dienna, 'Religion and Social Organisation in Formative Times, ' in Kurt V. Flannery (ed.) *The Mesoamerican Village*, (New York, 1976), p351.

2 Significantly, an early observer, Duran, found that the rite was Coahuítl, meaning 'Feast which belongs to one and all' Fray Duran, trans. F. Horcasitas and D. Heyden, *Book of the Gods, and Rites of the Ancient Calendar* (Norman, 1971) p77.

3 Patricia R. Anawalt, 'Understanding Aztec Human Sacrifice', *Archaeology*, (Jan.-Feb. 1980), p42. See also B. C. Brundage, *The Jade Steps A Ritual Life of the Aztecs*, University of Utah (Salt Lake City, 1985) p171, and the archaeological finds of E. M. Moctezuma, 'Archaeology and Symbolism in Ancient Mexico, The Temple Mayor of Tenochtitlan' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53:3, (Dec. 1985), p118.

4 Duran, *op cit*, p77.

5 For a detailed analysis of the format and frequency of Aztec human sacrifice, see Raymond Constant Kerkhove, *Explaining Aztec Human Sacrifice*, MA Thesis, (St. Lucia, 1994), pp34-5.

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and royal funerals, the figure moved into the hundreds or thousands. The inauguration of the *Templo Mayor* consumed twenty thousand lives.¹

Such slaughter amounts to the greatest ritual carnage in human history. Consequently, Mesoamerica is almost a resident alien in the world of human cultures. As Jacquetta Hawkes notes, Mesoamerican culture, and particularly its religion, appears unusually dark and is considered

strange and remote... brutal and sinister... threatening and perverse... uninhibited in displaying... sadism... [and as] manifest[ing]... little of the counterbalancing virtues of humanity.²

So pervasive is this 'dark' image that Michael Harner has called it an 'open wound' on the flank of scholarship.³

Explaining Mesoamerican/ Aztec 'Darkness'

Attempts to explain this 'darkness' have, quite simply, failed. The most common explanation – that the Aztecs and their kin were savage, immoral or amoral⁴ – is untenable in the face of the growing acknowledgement of the complexity of Aztec sciences, the delicate aesthetics of their literature, and the balanced nature of their ethico-legal codes. The Aztecs had strict laws against murder. Sacrificing priests had to be 'careful, helpful, never hurt anyone [and remain] passionate towards others ...[and] loving'.⁵

Faced with such paradoxes, Laurette Sejourné, Irene Nicholson and Miguel Leon-Portilla have promoted the notion that Aztec spirituality was 'betrayed in its most sacred essence'⁶ and was

1 Anawalt, *op cit* pp39-40.

2 Jacquetta Hawkes, *The Atlas of Early Man* (London, 1976), pp201-3.

3 Michael Harner, 'The Ecological Basis for Aztec Sacrifice', *American Ethnologist* 4, (1977), p133.

4 The Aztec amorality argument is still in favour with some; see for example, K. A. Read, 'Negotiating the Familiar and the Strange in Aztec Ethics', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 15: 1 (Spring 1987), pp6-7.

5 Bernardino de Sahagun, *Florentine Codex General History of the Things of New Spain* trans. A. J. O. Andrews & Charles E. Dibble, (Santa Fe, 1981) Bk. 3: 9: 70.

6 Laurette Sejourné, *Burning Water: Thought and Religion in Ancient Mexico*, (London, 1956) pp14-16.

corrupted, in its 'darkest hour'¹ into human sacrifice for 'vicious totalitarian ends'.² Apart from the inherent racism of such a view (consigning much of Mesoamerican history to mere 'ignorance... decadence'),³ this 'betrayal' theory is confounded by archaeological discoveries and improved readings of Mayan glyphs, which have established that mass sacrifice had *always* been a part of Mesoamerican society.

Other hypotheses suggest environmental or cultural deficiencies. Michael Harner and Marvin Harris, for example, view the rite as a means of procuring protein and 'essential amino acids' since victims' bodies were sometimes consumed.⁴ J.M Ingham, Barbara Price, David Carrasco and others claim that the Aztec elite developed mass sacrifices in order to terrorize their populace and enemy states.⁵ Peter Furst and Gordon Wasson assert that Mesoamerican religion is a remnant of Upper Paleolithic psychedelic shamanism; the implication of their argument being presumably that drug-induced confusion between hallucination and reality created sufficient hysteria for murder to be instituted as a sacred rite.⁶

All of these theories have serious flaws. Hunn has found that the early Mexicans had plenty of protein sources⁷ and only ate tiny slivers of human flesh in rare, restricted rites 'as a form of

1 Irene Nicholson, *Firefly in the Night: A Study of Ancient Nahuatl Poetry and Symbolism* (London, 1959), p23.

2 *Ibid*, p19.

3 *Ibid*, p23.

4 These views were expressed by Michael Harner in articles such as 'The Enigma of Aztec Sacrifice,' in *Natural History* 86:4, (April 1971), p133ff but gained greatest popularity through Marvin Harris' *Cannibals and Kings* (London, 1978).

5 See Barbara T. Price, 'Demystification, Enriddlement and Aztec Cannibalism: A Materialist Rejoinder to Harner' *American Ethnologist* 5:1, (February 1978), p105 and J. M. Ingham, 'Human Sacrifice at Tenochtitlan' *Comparative Studies of Society and Religion* 26:3, (July 1984), p347, 380. David Carrasco is the main champion of this line of argument. The best example of his views in this regard can be found in his combined work with J. Broda and A. A. Demarest, *The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan* (Berkeley, 1987), pp65-6.

6 P. Gordon Wasson, *The Wondrous Mushroom: Mycolatry in Mesoamerica* (New York, 1980), pp xvii, 57, 83, 95 and Peter J. Furst, *Flesh of the Gods: The Ritual Use of Hallucinogens*, (London, 1972), p271f.

7 E. Hunn, 'Did the Aztecs Lack Animal Protein Domesticates?' *American Ethnologist* 9:3, (August 1982), pp578-9.

communion'.¹ Likewise, R. Hilton and Inga Clendinnen have debunked the 'oppression' argument, finding little evidence of Mesoamerican kingdoms being unusually totalitarian,² and that 'mere oppression' could not explain 'how the trick worked'.³ Finally, it now seems Mesoamericans despised and tightly controlled the use of narcotics and in fact inflicted far harsher punishments than the modern West.⁴

The Light of Darkness?

Thus, the puzzle remains; the rite is 'still undeciphered'.⁵ Perhaps the reason for this mystery is that there has been little effort made to reconstruct what sacrificial death may have actually meant to its practitioners. In this paper, I weave together filaments of what the Aztecs themselves said and thought about human sacrifice. Their 'voice' will be their art and literature, especially their rich stock of poetry and prose, which was collected soon after the Conquest by Bernardino de Sahagun, Diego Duran, Motolinia and others, as well as the Aztec responses recorded in Conquistadors' records and ethnographic studies. In assembling this reconstruction, I am guided by Frederick Streng's firm belief that every culture has 'problematic states' which it seeks to remedy by developing a path of 'ultimate transformation'; that is: a set of personal and collective/ cultural practices.⁶ Hence, the view we are taking here is that of human sacrifice as a path of 'ultimate transformation'.

1 Duran, *op cit*, p191.

2 R. Hilton, 'Is Intellectual History Irrelevant? The Case of the Aztecs', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 33, (April 1972), p340.

3 Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1991), p4f.

4 de Sahagun, *op cit*, Bk. 2: 27: 106 Bk. 3: 5: 59.

5 David Carrasco, 'City as Symbol in Aztec Thought: Clues from the Codex Mendoza' *History of Religions* 20, (February 1980), p 201, note p7.

6 Frederick J. Streng, *Understanding Religious Life* 3rd edition (Belmont, 1982), pp2-8, 23-5, 43, 63, 84.

Dark Deeds or ‘Great Deeds’?

The first issue we need confront in order to establish a ‘Strengian perspective’ is whether the Aztecs considered their rite loathsome or honourable. It is often assumed that Aztec human sacrifice was the lot of poor or ‘disposable’ people such as commoners or foreigners. However, the earliest accounts concur that virtually all children slain in these rites were locals of noble lineage, *offered by their own parents*.¹ Likewise, adult victims rarely seem to have been foreigners. In 1454, the Aztec government forbade the slaying of captives from distant lands at their temples.² Duran’s informants told him that sacrifices were ‘*nearly always... friends of the [Royal] House*’³ (namely: warriors) and were often of considerable status, as well as coming from neighbouring city-states and allies who shared the same culture and creed.

Why this might be seems to have a lot to do with the nature of Mesoamerican warfare. Most people were captured rather than slain in war since the aim was ‘not to slay, to do no harm to man or woman... but to feed the idol’.⁴ *Xochiyaoyotl* (‘flowery wars’) – monthly ceremonial affrays between allies and neighbouring city-states – were the usual source of sacrificial victims who included priests and a high proportion of noblemen.⁵ In other words, the ‘victim-procuring wars’ were prestigious affairs through which local priests and lords stood a good chance of becoming sacrificial victims; as the Aztec Emperor reminded his victims, ‘today for you, tomorrow for me’.⁶ Certainly, the sacrifice of neighbouring kings was common enough for Classic Mayan monarchs to actually take on the title of those they captured.⁷

1 Compare Hernan Cortes, *Letters*, trans. A. R. Pagden (London, 1972), p105 with T. de Motolinia, trans. F. B. Steck, *History of the Indians of New Spain*, (Washington DC, 1951), pp118-19 and Duran, *op cit* (1971), pp223, 242.

2 Duran, trans. F. Horcasitas and D. Heyden, *The Aztecs: History of the Indies of New Spain*, (London, 1974) p141.

3 *Ibid*, my italics.

4 Duran, *op cit* (1971), p198.

5 Alfonso Caso, trans. L. Dunhan, *The Aztecs People of the Sun* (Norman, 1956), p88.

6 *Tezozomoc* Vol. 2, in Jacques Soustelle, *Daily Life of the Aztecs* (London, 1955), p100.

7 Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller, *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art* (New York, 1986), p210.

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These factors meant that there were many illustrious role-models for captives/soon-to-be-victims to emulate. The Tlaxcalcan captain Tlahuicoli, for example, who was captured and put in command of a major military expedition demanded to die in gladiatorial sacrifice *despite* being granted his freedom.¹ Likewise, the anonymous prince in the Mayan *Tale of Rabinal* escapes his captors to bid goodbye to his homeland, but nevertheless nobly returns to his enemy's temple to meet his ritual end.²

Thus, it seems sacrificial death was considered a glorious end. When Spaniards criticised the rite, Aztec informants made 'indifferent or sarcastic remarks'³ and were equally quick to ridicule the 'weakness of the Christians'.⁴ Duran notes that his informants applauded

the sacrifice of human beings... [as] the *honoured* oblation of *great lords and noblemen*. They remember these things and tell of them as if they had been *great deeds*.⁵

Sacrifices, as the 'main act' of huge feasts and festivals, were indeed hailed as 'great deeds'. Victims usually died 'centre-stage' amidst the full splendour of dancing troupes, orchestras, elaborate costumes and decorations, carpets of flowers, crowds of thousands and all the assembled élite.

The captive/victim was the Aztec equivalent of a celebrity or rock star; they were 'sighed for' and 'longed for' by the audience.⁶ Their deaths merited a public announcement and their names were immortalised in the local 'roll of honour'. Commemorated in songs, poems and epics, the deceased were further honoured by the *euillotl* (human effigies) their relatives had constructed from pine log torches and decorated with paper wings and jacket. These effigies were burnt in memory of the victim for two days, and they took

1 Peter G. Tsouras, *Warlords of the Ancient Americas: Central America* (London, 1996), p147.

2 Rabinal Achi, 'Teutro Indigenes Prehispanico' in Miguel Leon-Portilla (ed), *Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico*, p105.

3 Duran, *Book of the Gods and Rites* p227.

4 *Chilam Balam de Chumayel* trans.Miguel Rivera (Madrid, 1986), pp15 (29), 25 (51), 29 (58).

5 Duran, *Book of the Gods and Rites*, p227, my italics.

6 de Sahagun, *op cit* Bk. 2: 38: pp168-71.

pride of place in the heart of town. Indeed, sacrifices were made to a *euillotl*, as though to a god.¹

Honour and Compliance in Aztec Human Sacrifice

The prestige of sacrificial and war-related death explains why the victims Cortes and Alvarado freed 'indignantly rejected [the] offer of release and *demand*ed to be sacrificed.'² It may also explain why Diaz found that the Aztecs '...cared nothing for death in battle... [and] came at us like mad dogs'.³ Hernan Cortez described an actual hunger for death, noting that the Aztecs 'seemed *determined to perish* more than any race of man known before.'⁴ Purportedly, victims sang and danced to their deaths 'with great joy and gladness'.⁵ Others walked up 'purely of their own will',⁶ and the poets chanted *otiquittaco quinequi moyollo yehua itzmiquitla*: 'You came to see it... your heart desires it: it was death by the obsidian blade!'.⁷

But not every victim could have craved 'death by the obsidian blade'. Even Aztec accounts mention some who wept, 'faltered... weakened' or lost control of their bowels.⁸ Amazingly though, these were such a minority that they were viewed as a bad omen⁹ and a *tetlazolmiciliztli* ('insult to the gods').¹⁰ A 'weak' victim was hurriedly taken aside and slain amidst the congregation's sarcastic jeers of 'he quite acquitted himself as a man'.¹¹

What we can glean from all this is that the sacrificial role entailed a great deal of social expectation and acquiescence. Unwilling

1 *Ibid*, Bk. 2: 4: 18: 69-70, Bk. 6: p21.

2 Bernal Diaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*, (London, 1972), p159. The incident with Alvarado is described by Nigel Davies in his *The Aztecs: A History*, (London, 1973), p172.

3 Bernal Diaz, *op cit*, pp56, 142, 336.

4 Hernan Cortes, *Letters*, pp297-8.

5 Duran, *Book of the Gods and the Rites of the Ancient Calendar*, pp132, 232.

6 de Sahagun, *op cit* Bk. 2: 20: 49, Bk. 2: 24: 76, 33: 139 -49, Bk. 9: 19, 88.

7 Irene Nicholson, *op cit*, p190.

8 de Sahagun, *op cit* Bk. 2: 51.

9 Duran, *Book of the Gods and the Rites of the Ancient Calendar*, p132.

10 *loc.cit*.

11 de Sahagun, *op cit* Bk. 2: 21.

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victims were sometimes passed over in favour of more willing ones.¹ Key roles were reserved for those 'without [moral] defects... of good understanding... good mannered'.² For many rites, the victim had such a quantity of prescribed duties that the festival would have failed without his or her willing compliance. Victims were expected to bless children, greet and cheer passers-by, hear people's petitions to the gods, visit people in their homes, give discourses and lead sacred songs, processions and dances.³ Clendinnen and Brundage felt only a few had this kind of role, but the *Florentine Codex* and Duran make no such distinctions, stating that

those who had to die performed many *ceremonies*... [and] these [pre-sacrificial] rites were performed in the case of *all* the prisoners, *each in turn*.⁴

1 Sir John Eric Sidney Thompson, *Maya History and Religion* (Norman, 1970), p181.

2 de Sahagun, *op cit* Bk. 2: 24: 68-71. Victims for special roles were also expected to be charming, quick and able to dance 'with feeling' to the sacred music.

3 *Ibid*, Bk. 3: 8, 2: 5: 9, 2: 24: 68-71.

4 *Ibid* Bk. 2 : 5 : 9, my italics; see also Duran, *Book of the Gods and the Rites of the Ancient Calendar*, p112.

Dark, Dead Gods

When Spanish friars demanded that the Aztecs destroy their gods, the priests replied, enigmatically, 'our gods are *already dead*'.¹

Mesoamerican divinities are indeed mostly 'dark' or 'dead'. According to Richard Haly, the Aztec High God was basically a 'bone god', existing as the 'marrow' or 'dead shadow' behind all the gods.² Certainly, most Mexican deities are skeletons, skull-headed or severed heads and dismembered corpses.

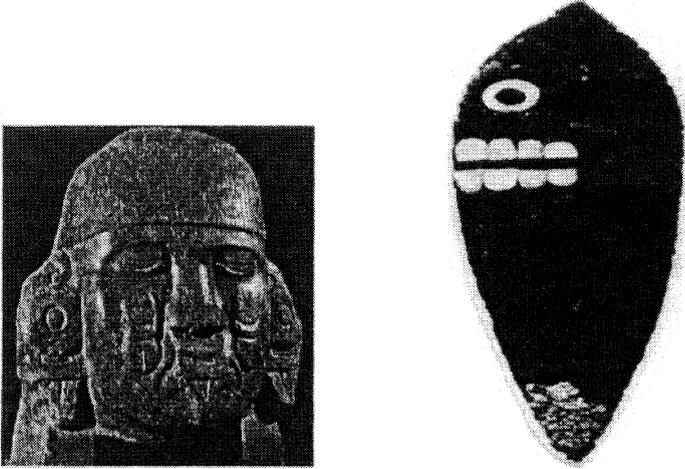


Figure 1: Dead, dark gods: God as a severed head (the moon goddess) and a hungry knife.

They are blackness and annihilation in one form or another, squatting in dimly lit or pitch black shrines.³ These *tezcatl* (obsidian – black volcanic glass – mirrors) bear names such as 'Shadow', 'Black One', 'the Night' and 'Naught' (*Mahuq'utah*).⁴ They are cosmic vortexes or vacuums; carnivores who devour warriors and

1 Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind* (Norman, 1963), p64, my italics.

2 Richard Haly, 'Bare Bones: Rethinking Mesoamerican Divinity' *History of Religions* 31:3, (February 1992) pp278, 286-9.

3 Duran, *op cit* (1971), p211.

4 *Popul Vuh: The Book of Counsel*, trans. D. Tedlock, (New York, 1985), p187.

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maul their hearts; natural disasters; 'the Causer and Giver of ailments'; 'the Sacrificer', 'the Enemy', 'the Box of Death' (*Micapetlacalli*) and 'the Mother of the Inferno'¹ who 'kills... [whoever] wages war against us'.² As one poet sighed, 'He [the High God] too, came to cut off my life on earth'.³

Through these terrible gods, we, as individuals, 'disappear' into *Toanpopolihuiyan*: 'the 'Common House, where we lose ourselves' and 'become as one'.⁴ Indeed, in this regard, this sinister pantheon is, in its extinguishing qualities, almost reminiscent of certain Buddhist concepts.⁵ Sacrificial hymns collected by Bernardino de Sahagun have the victim singing that 'in a coffer of jade [the 'eagle vessel' that held human hearts] *I burn myself up*',⁶ and that all 'will for ever end',⁷ or, even more intriguingly, 'our death was *utterly ended*'.⁸

The Glory of Dying Well

Such imagery suggests that sacrificial death was believed to dissolve and purify in some absolute sense; certainly, it was claimed that death brought theosis wherein to die is to 'become God' (*teo-ti*).⁹ Death contains all the highest joys, the highest truths and the highest states: 'peace and happiness are there'; 'all is eternal there'; there, 'the answer will be known (there)'.¹⁰

Regarding earthly life, by way of contrast, we hear it declared that:

1 Irene Nicholson, *op cit*, p 88.

2 Duran, *op cit*, (1974) p149.

3 Laurette Sejourné, *op cit*, p7.

4 Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Native Mesoamerican Spirituality* (New York, 1980), p44 and Irene Nicholson, *op cit*, p174.

5 This is perhaps most graphically evident in the resemblance to some of the equally fearsome depictions of Tibetan wrathful deities who, in tantric visualization practices, smash through the illusion of individuality and 'self-clinging' (*ātmagrāhaḥ bdaḡ 'dzin*) in a similar way to their Aztec counterparts, although with less of a communal or collective societal focus.

6 'Song of Yiacatecuhtli' in de Sahagun, *op cit* Bk.2: 245, my italics.

7 de Sahagun, *op cit* Bk.2: 236-237.

8 Irene Nicholson, *op cit*, p94, my italics.

9 Joef Haekel, 'Hochgott und Gotter im alten Mexiko' *Kairos* 13 (1959), pp132-3.

10 de Sahagun, *op cit* Bk. 6: 17: 203, and Irene Nicholson, *op cit*, pp50, 195.

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It is not true, no it is not true
That we came to live on the earth
We came here only to dream
We came here only to sleep.¹

Earth, we are told by a variety of Aztec poets, is not the place to accomplish things since 'our [real] home' lies in 'the Land of the Fleshless.'²

As might be expected with this kind of world-view, *how* one died was extremely important. The Aztecs meticulously organised death into types and levels. Passing away at home constituted the lowest end of the scale. 'A good death' was braver or more torturous. Those who died sacrificially, or in war or childbirth, procured the second-highest heaven (death in infancy formed the highest). Such fortunate souls are 'the God-dead' (*Teomicqui*) who

go pure... live *hard by, nigh unto* the Sun... [who] always forever... rejoice...[since] the House of the Sun is... a place of joy.³

Miguel Leon-Portilla has shown that references to being 'joined to/ at the side/ nigh unto' this or that deity refers to 'Twinship' with a Deity which counts as the highest possible state.⁴

Cutting Portals through the Impenetrable Wall

Sacrificial death was also thought to provide 'an opening'⁵ (what the Yaqui of northwest Mexico call 'the crack between the worlds') or portal into the highest Reality, which was hidden by an otherwise impenetrable wall. Native picture books such as *Codex Nuttall* show the heavens as a solid block above the world, occasionally punctured by a 'wound' through which deities could descend.

Mesoamericans required bloody 'openings' into the heavens because, as their religious songs complain, the gods are often

1 *Collection of Mexican Songs* Folio 14r; Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Native Mesoamerican Spirituality*, p184.

2 Irene Nicholson, *op cit*, p177.

3 de Sahagun, *op cit* Bk. 6: 21.

4 Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Native Mesoamerican Spirituality*, p62f.

5 Irene Nicholson, *op cit*, pp42-4.

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'stony'; that is: inexorable, silent.¹ Perforating the body, even to the point of death, was a way to 'perforate, penetrate' the 'mount' of God; indeed, this is the image used in some sacrificial hymns.² From infancy onwards, as Patricia Anawalt has shown, Aztecs performed ritual perforation known as *maceualiztli/ tlaxoquixtiliztli*, 'good deeds', 'blood penance' which entailed piercing the ears, tongue, forearms and legs and drawing straws or ropes through the wounds. Such self-tortures were at times fatal, but were viewed as the best means of attaining spiritual boons and spiritual experiences ('vision serpents'). The practice was touted as our 'salvation'.³



Figure 2: Tlaxoquixtiliztli (autosacrifice).⁴

Heart-Extraction: Returning the Divine Fragment

The chilling nature of Aztec heart-extraction may need to be read in the context of this culture that viewed excruciating (sometimes fatal) wounds as a path to the gods. The human offering was not enduring something he or she had no previous experience of. Nor did he or she suffer alone, since before and during human sacrifice, victims, priests and congregations habitually 'created openings' by perforating and bleeding themselves.⁵

The rite of ripping out victims' living hearts created the ultimate 'opening' through which to access the gods. The physical heart-soul

1 *Ibid*, p199.

2 de Sahagun, *op cit*, Bk. 2, App. 242.

3 *Popul Vuh*, p190.

4 *Codex Magliabechiano* Folio 79r.

5 de Sahagun, *op cit*, Bk. 2: 3: 8, 20: 49, 21: 47.

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(*tona*) was considered both the seat of the individual and a fragment of the Sun's heat (*istli*), and indeed the Sun itself was also considered a heart-soul, 'round, hot, pulsating'.¹ This divine fragment was seen as 'entombed' in our body and ruined by base desires.

Where is your heart?
You give your heart to each thing in turn.
Carrying, you do not carry it...
You destroy your heart on earth.²

Heart-extraction was evidently believed to liberate one's *istli* and reunite it with the Sun.

Aztec *Codex Magliabechiano*, Folio 70 depicts a victim's transformed heart flying Sunward on a trail of blood:

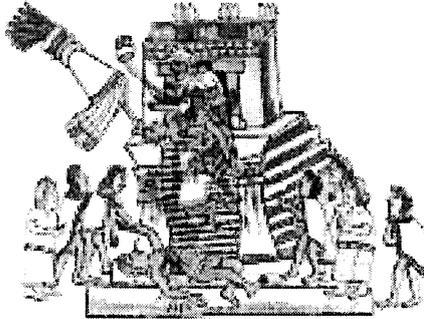


Figure 3: Emancipating the heart.³

The scene echoes a verse in *Codex Matritensis*:

My heart rises;
I fix my eyes upon You,
next to You, beside You,
O Giver of Life!¹

¹ Alan Sandstrom, *Corn is Our Blood: Culture and Ethnic Identity in a Contemporary Aztec Village* (Norman, 1991) pp239-40, 257; and Eva Hunt, *Transformation of the Hummingbird: Cultural Roots of a Zinacantan Mythical Poem* (Ithaca, 1977) p89.

² Irene Nicholson, *op cit*, pp156, 203.

³ *Codex Magliabechiano*, Folio 70.

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As noted earlier, ‘next to You, beside You’ refers to the highest possible spiritual attainment: the mystical state of Twinship with the deity. Likewise, ‘rising’ seems to be a metaphor for spiritual ascent. Images of heart-raising and heart-burning pervade Aztec poetry and Aztec heart-extraction. In sacrificial rites, the extracted heart was raised several times as its fumes (*istli*, ‘heat’) wafted upwards; additionally, it was often burnt to aid its ascent. Even today, Chamula Mayans refer to the ‘best’ (that is, most noble) heart as ‘burning’ or ‘rising’, while a heart on the the point of death is described as ‘very hot’.² The Aztec verb *tle’ca.uia* (‘to burn’, ‘to set on fire’) is, moreover, etymologically related to the verb *tle’cauia* (‘to raise’ or ‘take up’).³ The end result was the notion of a *Yolleteotl*, a ‘God-heart’ which is apparently shown (wearing a little God-mask) in *Codex Laud*:



Figure 4: *Yolleteotl* (God-heart), wearing a Divine mask.⁴

1 *Codice Matritensis Folio 195r*, in Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Native Mesoamerican Spirituality* p187.

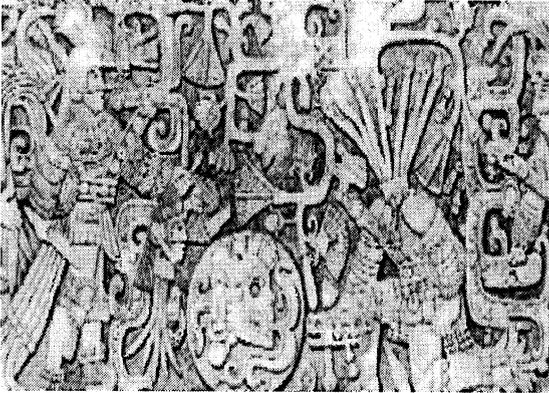
2 G. H. Gossen, ‘Animal Souls and Human Destiny in Chamula’ *Man* 10:3 (September 1975), pp449-50.

3 F. X. Clavigero, trans. J. O. Anderson, *Rules of the Aztec Language: Classical Nahuatl Grammar* (Salt Lake City, 1973), p8.

4 *Codex Laud*.

Decapitation: Untangling the Soul?

Decapitation was undoubtedly another 'portal' of emancipation, being the second principal method of Aztec sacrifice. Native rationales for the act have been lost, but are certainly ancient. The centrepiece of the 9th and 10th century ball courts at both Tajin (on the Gulf Coast) and Chichen Itza is a series of reliefs depicting a key player being decapitated. From his neck, he sprouts *seven* serpents and vegetable vines which push back the amazed participants:



Figures 5 & 6: Decapitated ball players sprouting seven serpents and vines.¹

Although we do not know precisely what this represents, Alan Sandstrom has found that contemporary Nahua (Aztecs) believe that each person has a seven-segmented *tonali* ('energy' or 'soul') which is viewed as a series of 'serpents' 'twisted' throughout the body.² Possibly the ball court reliefs depict the release and 'untwisting' of *tonali* through decapitation, perhaps even as a means

1 *Aparico stela* (Tajin, . Vera Cruz) and *The Great Ball Court* (Chichen Itza, Yucatan).

2 Sandstrom, *op cit.* pp239-40, 257-58.

of ‘untangling’ the knotted earth, as Cecilia Klein’s study of the carvings suggests.¹

Error and Atonement

Human sacrifice was also evidently a vehicle for atoning one’s own, as well as, others’ wrongs. According to the Mayan *Chilam Balam*, one woman, as she prepared herself for the sacrificial altar ‘took upon herself the guilt of the locusts that have destroyed all that the people sowed’.² The Aztecs described victims who were ‘sent [that is: killed] to plead for us,’ or ‘consecrated to annul all sin.’³ In one Aztec poem, a warrior-victim announces that ‘I embrace mankind... I give myself to the community’.⁴

Death might seem a severe atonement, but in Aztec society, the slightest *tlatlacolli* (‘sin’ or ‘insult’) was a deadly serious matter. *Tlatlacolli* itself was viewed as an extremely dangerous force. Even a humble villager could, through an immoral act, unleash widespread natural disasters. Chamula Maya still blame plagues and droughts on the sins of individual villagers.⁵ If an adulterer were to enter a house, Aztecs believed, all turkey chicks would perish from *tlazomiquiztli* (‘filth-death’).⁶ For this reason, virtually every error incurred either the death sentence, life-threatening beatings, or permanent exile. If a ritual dancer made a wrong step; if a novice priest accidentally allowed a doughball offering to roll away, they were dragged off and executed.⁷

Although if such a person were not executed, they would probably have killed themselves anyway, for the Aztecs far outpaced their Catholic conquerors when it came to feeling burdened by guilt.

1 Cecilia F. Klein, ‘Woven Heaven, Tangled Earth: A Weaver’s Paradigm of the Mesoamerican Cosmos’ in Anthony F. Aveni and E. Urton (eds), *Ethnoastronomy and Archaeoastronomy in the American Tropics* (New York, 1982) p11f.

2 *Chilam Balam de Chamayel*, p42 (112).

3 Duran, *op cit* (1971), p232.

4 MSS *Romance de los...* Folio 27r, in Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico*, p82.

5 Francisco Clavigero, *Historia antigua de Mexico* as cited in Frank J Neumann, ‘The Black Man in the Cave: An Aztec Variant of the Gatekeeper Motif’ in F. E. Reynolds and E. H. Waugh (eds), *Religious Encounters with Death* (London, 1977) p47.

6 de Sahagun, *op cit* Bk. 5: 29: 191-92.

7 *Ibid*, Bk. 2: 25: 80-86.

Wrongdoers in the Aztec world would loudly proclaim that they were 'of mud, of earth'. They would physically and mentally torture themselves with *nonocoliloca* ('the hatred which I feel for myself') by slitting their tongues for vices of speech or their ears for vices of listening.¹ In classic Nahuatl (the Aztec language) the verbal form *ni-c-yecoa*, 'I sin', is closely related to *ni-c-ye.coa*, 'I finish it': error, quite literally, 'finishes' or 'ruins' everything.² There was a logical progression from the severity of sin through to the 'penance' of human sacrifice; indeed, the Nahuatl words for 'penance' and 'human sacrifice' were interchangeable.³ Mere tears and blood washed away 'vile qualities' to some extent, but nevertheless even

for a slight [sin they] hanged themselves, or threw themselves down precipices, or put an end to themselves by abstinence.⁴

Slavery and Capital Punishment

Such 'fatal atonement' was also visited upon slaves who were the only other main group from which human sacrifices were drawn,⁵ and indeed it is no coincidence that Aztec 'sinners' actually described themselves as 'slaves' since enslavement was the punishment for all smaller misdeeds and debt. It was not a permanent class, and seems to have been composed largely of local people;⁶ anyone could fall into (and out of) it. ⁷ However, if one continued to err, then slavery guaranteed a sacrificial end. Miscreant slaves were sold at market to whatever trade or craft guilds required someone to represent (and hence die as) their patron deity at the next festival.⁸ So, sacrificial death sometimes blended capital punishment with personal atonement: 'fallen' persons atoned for (and were punished for) their crimes by dying for the gods. Some slave-deaths of this type were followed by an Aztec priest delivering

1 F. X. Clavigero, *op cit* p78.

2 *Ibid*, p7.

3 Burr Cartwright Brundage, *The Jade Steps*, pp152, 187.

4 T. Motolinia, *History of the Indians of New Spain*, pp106-7.

5 de Sahagun, *op cit* Bk. 2: 34 :148.

6 Duran, *op cit* (1971), p260.

7 On the nature of Aztec slavery, see Soustelle, *op cit* pp73-7; and Davies, *op cit*, p 179.

8 Duran, *op cit* (1971), p131.

a sermon about ‘downfall’ and what a real danger it was it was since those who ‘esteemed... sweetness... ended in misery’.¹

‘The Road to Our Downfall’: Humiliation-onto-Death

Such attitudes hint at an entire theology centred around ‘the road to our downfall’ as the Aztecs termed it, and this theology may well have provided the format and overall context for human sacrifice. Certainly one of the key myths of Mesoamerica is such a story. It concerns Quetzalcoatl Topiltzin, the epitome of an ascetic, celibate priest-king who, after decades of perfect conduct, agrees to imbibing a drink which he is told will make him ‘compassionate’ and help him to ‘think of [or perhaps, in modern parlance, ‘come to terms with’] death’.² Intoxicated, Quetzalcoatl commits incest with his sister, but then, overcome with remorse, he quits his throne. He buries and destroys his possessions and wanders about aimlessly, enduring hardships and humiliations. Finally (at least according to some versions of the tale), Quetzalcoatl immolates himself in a bonfire, thereby becoming the Morning Star. Significantly, Quetzalcoatl’s ‘humiliation onto death’ is viewed as *necessary*; as the myth (*Leyenda de Los Soles*) itself explains,

he [Quetzalcoatl] fell... in order that he might strive, in order that the Dawn might come.³

Implied in this theme of ‘necessary humiliation’ is a warning against pride, and indeed pride was the chief topic of Mesoamerican homilies. Priests and Lords were constantly cautioned to ‘humble’ and ‘humiliate’ themselves through set ‘Humiliations’ (meaning self-sacrifices).⁴ Thus, it is of little surprise that ‘necessary humiliation’ is a theme of Aztec human sacrifice. Most captives were kept for weeks – sometimes a year – before being slain. They

1 de Sahagun, *op cit* Bk. 2: 24: 21. Interestingly, this same blend of punishment and atonement can be seen in Aztec attitudes toward state enemies. When Cortes denounced their sacrifice, Emperor Moctezuma countered that at least the Aztecs gave such foes, who were ‘condemned to death’, the ‘honour’ of dying for the gods, whereas the Spanish simply slew them on the battlefield; Clavigero, in C. S. Braden, *Religious Aspects of the Conquest of Mexico* (Durham, 1933) p59.

2 de Sahagun, *op cit* 3:4:16-18.

3 Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico*, pp92-9.

4 Motolinia, *op cit*. p149, *Popul Vuh*, p8.

initially lived a regal but religious existence chanting, fasting and holding vigils – rather similarly to Quetzalcoatl. Then, again much like Quetzalcoatl, they were feted: they were given ‘pleasure girls’ and intoxicants. After their ‘downfall’, they again emulated Quetzalcoatl by giving away and burying everything they owned. Finally, naked like infants (wearing only a paper loincloth), they met their deaths.

The Great Rebirth

This dressing like an infant suggests a connection with the Aztec emphasis on child-sacrifice. It was said that ‘in the time of childhood, still in the time of purity, the good death is merited’.¹ As has already been noted, those who died in infancy occupied the highest heaven, suggesting to dress like a child was not simply a humiliation, but rather was also an allusion to seeking the highest heaven, to being ‘reborn’ through death. A large number of the ‘sagely discourses’ (which were a standard part of Aztec upbringing) bemoan the fact that our ‘jade’ (hearts or souls) were ‘glowing’ at birth and in infancy, but then grow ‘cold,’ ‘enshrouded’ and ‘twisted’ as we age.² Evidently human sacrifice was considered a vehicle for recapturing this lost (childhood) purity; certainly human sacrifice was sometimes referred to as ‘birth’.³ The captive is known as the ‘child, son’ of his captors, and inasmuch as he sings, throughout the sacrifice, ‘my life shall revive... my heart will be refreshed’, he hopes to recapture this lost childhood purity.⁴ Indeed, in gladiatorial sacrifice, the victim is even tied by an umbilical-like ‘sustenance rope’⁵ which runs from his waist to a ‘birth canal’ (a hole in a stone).

1 de Sahagun, *op cit*, Bk.6:21.

2 *Ibid*, Bk.6 : 18-21 and Codice Matritensis Folio 116r in Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Native Mesoamerican Spirituality*, p210.

3 de Sahagun, *op cit*, Bk.2:160, 235.

4 *Ibid*, Bk.2:160.

5 *Ibid*, Bk.2:21:51.

Dying as God: Becoming by Enacting

Aztec texts frequently refer to human sacrifice as *neteotoquiliztli*, 'the desire to be regarded as a god'.¹ Many rites consisted of victims taking on the paraphernalia, habits and attributes of the god or goddess whom they were dying as. This was known as being an *ixiptla*, becoming the god's representative or image. Interestingly, Aztec texts do not differentiate between human *ixiptla* and wooden or stone idols.² In fact, so elaborately costumed and painted were human *ixiptla* that even the congregation was unsure which were human and which were stone or wood.

To understand the significance of this, we need to digress a little into Mesoamerican concepts of divinity. Mesoamericans viewed deities as multiple yet One.³ Rather like an actor (the Mayan term for god, *bacab*, actually meant 'clown, actor'),⁴ gods usually wore masks, changing costumes and personas as the need arose, constantly transforming into each other and into a wide range of objects.⁵ Their fluidity was such that the actual *appearance* or *face* of the God was a great mystery. Even the highest Mexican idols – those occupying the lofty pyramid-temples – were simply featureless lumps of dough over which clothes and precious masks were placed, and they were further hidden from view by bundled wrappings and veils.⁶

As a result, Aztec literature constantly speaks of a yearning to see the God's 'real' face and create a true 'face' for one's self.⁷ In death, we are told that we will finally see God's face and achieve our own 'face'.⁸ When a victim appeared in full regalia before the congregation, it was said that the divinity had been given 'human form': the god *now* had an *ixitli* (face),⁹ since originally, as the

1 Duran, *op cit* (1971), p177 (Note 4).

2 *Ibid*, p102.

3 See Miguel Leon-Portilla, 'Aztec Gods: How Many?' in J. Akerenson (ed), *Citra 1492* (Washington DC, 1991).

4 J. Eric S. Thompson, *Maya History and Religion*, p227.

5 Hunt, *op cit*, p55. See also de Sahagun, *op cit* Bk. 2:226, 238-239, and Duran, *op cit* (1971), p101.

6 Duran, *op cit* (1971), pp72-3.

7 Miguel Leon-Portilla, 'Pre-Hispanic Thought, ' in M. de la Gueva (ed), *Major Trends in Mexican Philosophy* (Notre Dame, 1966) p38.

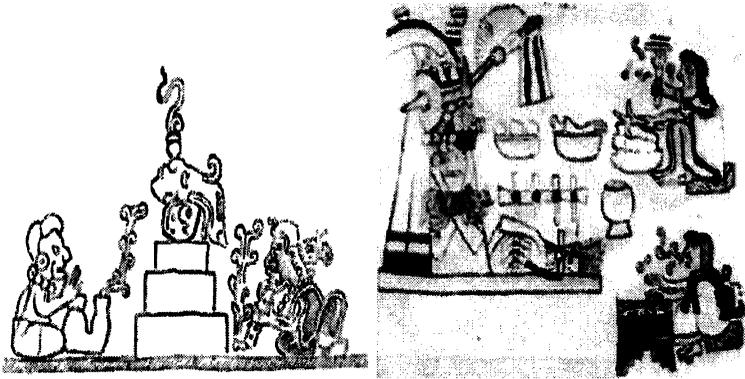
8 Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico*, p85.

9 Arvind Hvindfeldt, *Teotl and Ixiptlatli* (Copenhagen, 1958) pp80-8.

The Dark Side

sacrificial hymn of Cihuacoatl declares, 'Eagle feathers are no mask, for he rises *unmasked*'.¹

All the native and Spanish sources on Aztec human sacrifice make it clear that victims were believed to attain full identity *with* the gods by dying *as* gods. Sahagun and Duran describe them being 'worshipped... as the deity'² or 'as though they had been gods'³ (–the original Nahuatl term being *nicnoteoti'tzinca*, literally, 'I consider him a god').⁴ Even whilst still alive, victims were honoured, hallowed and addressed (like gods) as 'Lord' and 'Lady'.⁵ Posthumously, their remains were treated as actual relics of the gods which explains why victims' skulls, bones and skin were often painted, bleached, stored and displayed, or else used as ritual masks and oracles. Diego Duran's informants told him that whoever wore a victim's skin considered himself 'divine'.⁶ The *Mayan Codex Dresden* and the *Aztec Codex Magliabechiano* depict victims' heads being worshipped and given food offerings.



Figures 7 & 8: Worshipping victims' severed heads.⁷

The Eternal Sacrifice

1 de Sahagun, *op cit*, Bk. 2, Appendix 231.

2 Duran, *op cit* (1971), pp42, 109, 232.

3 de Sahagun, *op cit* Bk. 2: 226, 238-9.

4 Clavigero, *op cit*, p98.

5 Duran, *op cit* (1971), p189.

6 *Ibid*, p176.

7 *Codex Dresden* and *Codex Magliabechiano* Folio 72r.

Dark Religion? Aztec Perspectives on Human Sacrifice

Some years after the Conquest, a body of Spanish Franciscans confronted the remaining Aztec priesthood and demanded – under threat of death – that they desist from their murderous practices. The Aztec priests conferred on the matter and boldly gave this defence:

*Life is because of the gods; with their sacrifice they gave us life... they produce our sustenance... [and] all which nourishes life.*¹

What the Aztec priests were referring to was a central Mesoamerican belief that a great on-going sacrifice sustains the universe. Everything is *tonacayotl*, the ‘spiritual flesh-hood’ or ‘bodily (sacrificial) presence’ of the gods on earth. Everything – the earth, crops, the moon, stars and people – springs from the severed or buried bodies, fingers, blood or heads of sacrificed gods.²



Figure 9: Large sculpture of the dismembered corpse of the Moon goddess, which stood in front of the Aztecs’ Great Temple in today’s Mexico City. Each severed limb is shown as Divine, wearing a God mask. Many Aztec sculptures and illustrations depicted the shattered or sacrificed bodies of the gods.

1 Miguel Leon-Portilla, ‘Colligues and Christian Doctrines’ in his *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind* (Norman, 1963) p215, my italics. A similar defence of human sacrifice was given during the Conquest itself. See Bernal Diaz, *op cit*, p240.

2 H. B. Nicholson, ‘Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico’ *Handbook of Middle American Indians 10*, (Austin, 1971) p402.

Dawn is the sun daily igniting itself for our sake; and then, crackling and screaming its way across the sky, the sun gives us sunset by smoldering in its own blood and embers.¹ It tears out its left eye (according to the Mayans) so that we will not be bothered by too much light at night; hence, the moon is the sun's hollow left eye socket.²

Our very existence, it was felt, was owed to this process: humanity is known as *macehuale*, 'the dead brought back to life through penance'.³ The Earth Goddess *becomes* 'our food' so that we will not 'die of hunger'.⁴ Daily, we till and eat the Earth Goddess's 'flesh' (soil and crops), build with her 'bones' (stones), and drink her 'blood' (water).⁵ In several sacrificial rites, this was emphasized by eating grain images of the gods and declaring '*nictecua*', 'I eat God'.⁶

Debt and Offerings

A strong sense of indebtedness arose from this worldview. Compared to the eternal sacrifice of the gods, human offerings were just a 'humble present',⁷ a *nextlahualli* ('a debt, or 'tribute paid'), and indeed *nextlahualli* was a commonly used metaphor for human sacrifice.⁸ Monaghan sees this encapsulated in the term *nchiso yu'uva* which was borrowed from the Aztecs' neighbours, the Nuyou Mixtec.⁹ *Nchiso yu'uva* literally means a 'contract with the Earth' which involves giving life for life, on the basis of the understanding that one thing – and hence, everything – only lives by killing something else.

We live here on the Earth [the dancer stomps the ground]
We are all fruits of the Earth.

1 Caso, *op cit.* pp32-3.

2 Thompson, *op cit.* pp203, 235.

3 Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture*, p111.

4 de Sahagun, *op cit.* Bk. 2: 23: 64.

5 Sandstrom, *op cit.* p238.

6 Duran, *op cit.* (1971), p215.

7 *Ibid.*, p188.

8 Burr Cartwright Brundage, *The Jade Steps*, p157.

9 J. Monaghan, 'Sacrifice, Death and the Origin of Agriculture in the Codex Venus' *American Antiquity* 55:3 (1990), pp561-7.

Dark Religion? Aztec Perspectives on Human Sacrifice

The Earth sustains us...
We eat of the earth
*and the Earth eats us.*¹

The modern Nahua shaman Aurelio puts it another way: 'everything in our lives is a *gift*';² nothing comes to us for free. Even under the threat of execution, Mesoamericans insisted that they *must* 'pay the debt for [the gods'] bringing rain': if things are not paid for, a disastrous cosmic imbalance results.³ Thus, rather than being an anomaly, human sacrifice was perceived as a natural obligation and so part of a mechanical tit-for-tat. The complex rites of kings and priests with its self-tortures and sacrifices were believed to 'set the people free' and 'protect the people',⁴ whereas the victim simply 'gave her service'⁵ and 'fulfil[led]' his 'duty'.⁶

Human sacrifice was, in this sense, the 'cherry' on top of a whole pile of offerings through which the Aztecs sought to repay their debt to the gods. They 'gladly parted'⁷ with everything, happily burying, smashing, slaying and sinking vast quantities of quail, rabbits, dogs, feathers, flowers, insects, beans, grains, paper, rubber and treasures as sacrifices.⁸ Even the 'stage' for human sacrifice, the massive temple-pyramids, were offering mounds crammed with treasures, grains, soil and human and animal sacrifices that were buried as gifts to the deities.⁹ Adorned with the land's finest art, treasure and victims, temples themselves became offerings which were buried under new structures every eight or fifty-two years.

1 Sandstrom, *op cit*, p263, my italics.

2 *Ibid*, p368.

3 J. Marcus, 'Archaeology and Religion: A Comparison of Zapotec and Maya' *World Archaeology* 10:2 (October 1978), p175.

4 *Chilam Balam* p27 (54-57).

5 de Sahagun, *op cit* Bk. 2:36:156.

6 *Ibid*, Bk. 3: 10: 29.

7 Motolinia, *op cit*, p122.

8 Duran, *op cit* (1971), pp169, 188, 215. See also de Sahagun, *op cit* Bk. 2: Appendix 176.

9 E. M. Moctezuma, 'Archaeology and Symbolism in Aztec Mexico: The Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53:3 (December 1985), p806.

‘Dark’ Religion as a Valid Mode of Spirituality

Despite two centuries of scholarship, many cultures continue to be dismissed as primitive and savage for having practised some form of human sacrifice. The worlds of the Celts, the Norse, the Asante, the early Peruvians and Hawaiians are mostly portrayed as dark and deluded, inhabited by ignorant, superstitious people, led by wicked priests. This is an insult to the sophistication of these cultures and their respective spiritualities. Highly urbane societies – indeed, much of the world – has practised human sacrifice at one time or another. The rite was part and parcel of the Kālī cult and Śaivite Hinduism well into the 1830s (until British authorities stamped it out),¹ although modern Śaivites now either deny or else completely ignore this heritage. As strange as sacrificial creeds might seem to us today, we need not look too far for modern parallels such as Kamikaze pilots or suicide bombers.

The beauty of Frederick’s Streng’s model is that it allows us to treat sacrificial creeds positively, as viable paths by which people sought to ultimately transform themselves and their community. Of course, in terms of the severity of its demands, Aztec/ Mesoamerican religion was a ‘dark’ faith, yet this may, in the end, be the best explanation for the system’s persistence over such a wide area for so many thousands of years. Its appeal evidently came from its willingness to publicly tackle the inevitability of death; for unlike many creeds, Aztec religion never paid lip service to the idea of dying for God or seeking an afterlife.

¹ Nigel Davies, *Human Sacrifice in History and Today*, (New York, 1981), pp13f.