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Public Ritual Sacrifice as a Controlling Mechanism for the Aztec

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Public Ritual Sacrifice as a Controlling Mechanism for the Aztec

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Anthropology Honors Thesis

Introduction

For decades, archaeologists have researched the fascinating finds of Aztec sacrifice. Evidence of their sacrifices are seen on temple walls, stone carvings, bones, and in Spanish chronicler drawings. Although public ritual sacrifice was practiced before the Aztecs, with evidence from the Olmec civilization (1200-1300 BCE) and Maya (200-900 BCE), Aztec sacrifices are among the most extensively documented. How does such a practice as human sacrifice survive in different civilizations through different rulers? This thesis will analyze the phases of Aztec public ritual sacrifice and the close relationship to their origin myths, or founding stories. It will also use anthropological theories of ritual to explain how ritual sacrifice functions.

To address this question, this paper uses anthropological theories of ritual to examine rituals of the Aztecs (1300-1539) and the testimonies of rituals in the Colonial period (1539-1848). Specifically, I will analyze the phases of Aztec public ritual sacrifice and the close relationship to their origin myths, or founding stories. The analysis will determine the trajectory of the rituals based on their origin myths and discuss how the number of victims, location, and length of ritual changed over the course of Aztec history.

Ritual Theory

To begin, we must define what we are studying. Since ritual is used as a social glue, I emphasize definitions of ritual that are concerned with group theory. This thesis is especially concerned with analyzing the theories of René Girard and Roy Rappaport

against the Mesoamerican archaeology. Help from other anthropologists such as: Catherine Bell, Pierre Bourdieu, Edmund Leach, Emile Durkheim, and Åsa Berggren supplement the two main theories.

Rituals are the foundation of society. They create an environment where laypeople lose their personal identity in favor of the group. They reinforce social roles and ideologies through their performance. Pierre Bourdieu explains rituals through “practice theory where rituals are seen as expressions of meaning, as parts of a structuration process where everything and everybody are tied together into a whole that is perceived as objective and true” (Bruck 1999: 176). Rituals being perceived as “objective and true”, or normal, bleeds into Roy Rappaport’s assertion that ritual conventionality is gained by ritual’s “invariant procedures,” which make it seem like the ritual has been done since the beginning of the civilization (Rappaport 1979: 176). Origin myths function similarly as they are, logically, made by the people to institutionalize community behavior while also appearing as though they were created pre-civilization.

Another important category of ritual is the liturgical order. “A liturgical order is a sequence of formal acts and utterances, and as such it is made real only when those acts are *performed* and those utterances *voiced*” (Rappaport 1999: 118; emphasis added). In other words, rituals, as liturgical orders, must be performed to keep their gravitas. They “not only recognize the authority of the conventions it represents, it gives them their very existence” (Rappaport 1999: 125). Additionally, archaeologist Åsa Berggren defines ritual “as action, [as] part of the dialectical relationship with structure, which

contributes to change and continuity within society” (Berggren, Stutz Nilsson 2010: 173). The ritual’s action reinforces stasis, legitimizes change, and inherently codifies structure within a population.

Like everything in the universe, the natural order is to disintegrate. “It is therefore necessary to establish at least some conventions in a manner which protects them from dissolution in the variations of day-to-day behavior and the violations in which history abounds. [Liturgy] establishes and ever again reestablishes those orders” (Rappaport 1999: 130). Conventions bind a community in the face of change. The most powerful and effective conventions are rituals. To strengthen the ritual, sacrifice is added to the performance. Archaeology demonstrates that any ritual could be used and adapted depending on the situation.

Mimetic Theory in Ritual Sacrifice

Since ritual is the basic social act, as argued by Girard, ritual sacrifice then acts in a similar manner, binding communities and power-relationships together. Rituals are designed to make the performers and viewers feel attached to a successful tradition established by their ancestors. Ritual sacrifice is unequivocally powerful because it connects to historical excellence in an “inexact imitation of the generative act” (Girard 1972: 269). Everyone knows one’s founding story; it is common knowledge. So a regularly-timed performance, intensified with a loss of life, would be a useful mechanism to a ruler. Replaying the generative act would remind the people of social norms such as the hierarchy and characteristics to strive toward.

One way for violence to manifest in ritual is scapegoating. Girard reduces the solution to recurring community conflict caused by mimetic rivalry for limited resources, to scapegoating. First, mimetic rivalries are caused, he argues, because much of human learning occurs through imitation. What one wants, according to Girard, is merely a reflection of what another desires, and vice versa. The scapegoat mechanism is the origin of ritual sacrifice, which is why it is repeatedly turned to, especially in times of instability. Concerning ritual sacrifice, when violence is included in the origin myth of a civilization, violence in the name of the gods is therefore inherent in the community. In order to return to the stasis before the conflict, a reenactment of the origin myth is done to quell tension. Such reenactments are comforting because everyone is familiar with the stories.

One key feature of ritual sacrifice is that the victim(s) is (are) marginal to the community. For example, orphans, slaves, and captives are often used. In some cases, idealized warriors are chosen. However, in every case, the sacrifices are distanced from the community before the sacrifice. The separation ensures that the scapegoat, or substitution victim, has an identity far enough removed to not cause enemies with their death (which would defeat the purpose of the ritual), yet close enough to stand in for the community tensions. “Durkheim believes that men are shaped culturally by an educational process that belongs to the spear of religion. To carry Durkheim’s insight to its conclusion, I will add that religion is simply another term for the surrogate victim, reconciles mimetic oppositions and assigns a sacrificial goal to the mimetic impulse” (Girard 1972: 307). To complete the theory, every sacrifice is a double substitution. The

first is one victim who replaces every member of the community in the origin myth. The second substitution, which is made in every consequent sacrifice, are those who stand in for the original victim. The original victim comes from inside the community. The second substitute victim must come from the marginal or outside communities, otherwise a community catharsis could not be reached.

Ritual sacrifice is designed to benefit the community; this is at its heart. In times of uncertainty, whether it be from war or climate, rituals are called upon because of their enduring quality. Girard stresses that the function of ritual sacrifice is to restore peace to a community for a time until the process needs to be repeated. He states that sacrifice in a ritual provides an opportunity for catharsis that would otherwise not happen. There is no vengeance within a community attached to ritual sacrifice; the identity of the victim is structured to ensure this. "The surrogate victim dies so that the entire community, threatened by the same fear, can be reborn in a new or renewed cultural order" (Girard 1972: 255). To add to this theory concerning sacrifice, myth plays an important role. If sacrifice, human and/or other, is included in the founding myths, violence is automatically accepted as conventional and treated as a part of life. Ritual legitimizes "bad" violence (i.e. murders not under the name of the gods) into "good" (i.e. benefits the stability of the community). Under ritual, the murderer priest is exhumed and revenge is quelled within the community. In their dramatic splendor, rituals bond the population.

The Aztecs

In 1345 CE, the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan was founded. From 1345- 1521 CE, the Aztec civilization flourished in Mesoamerica. On August 13, 1521 CE, Cortés, the famous Spanish conquistador, captured their capital city of Tenochtitlan and the Aztec empire quickly fell soon after. There was a constant struggle for power in central Mesoamerica during Aztec rule. The many warring city-states learned to want power from observing others want of it, otherwise known as mimetic learning. Because of this mimetic learning, a social bond was needed to maintain social order and buffer the threat of instability. The mechanism was ritual sacrifice. The origin myths which contained sacrifices legitimized the social action.

The Aztecs ruled from the 14th to 16th century until the invasion of the Spaniards. They dominated most of central and northern Mesoamerica with their strong warriors, precise calendars, vast organized road system, and religion. They built some of the largest buildings in Mesoamerica, regardless of the civilization. Thanks to their preservation, first-hand account codices (read with a grain of salt), art and writing system, a lot can be studied about their civilization. Concerning this study, it is truly a testament to the power of ritual sacrifice that the conventions were passed down hundreds of years and still remained crucial to the Aztecs' success.

Sacrifice was the way of life for the Aztecs, enmeshed in their temple and marketplace practices, part of their ideology of the redistribution of riches and their beliefs about how the cosmos was ordered, and an

instrument of social integration that elevated the body of the ruler and potency of the gods. Ritual slaughter within the ceremonial precincts of Aztec life was the instrument, in part, for educating adolescents about their social future, communicating with the many gods, transmitting cosmological convictions, as well as directing social change in the form of imperial expansion.

[Carrasco 1999: 3]

The Importance of the Human Body

Human sacrifice for the Aztecs stemmed from the belief that the “human body was the vulnerable nexus of vital cosmic forces and was filled with divine essence that needed periodic regeneration. One means to this generation was called *teomiqui*, to die divinely, which meant human sacrifice” (Carrasco 1999: 73). By giving one’s body, one was returning the divine essence the gods gave in the first place. Instituted in their origin myths,

Divine beings temporarily departed their space-time and infiltrated everything on Earth, giving earthly beings their identities, energies, and powers to live and procreate. All creatures and forces on the earth and in the air were made up of subtle, eternal divine substances and hard, heavy, destructible, worldly substances that served as shells to the divine substance. All life-forms on Earth were hard shells covering the divine substance within (Carrasco 2013: 218).

The Importance of Calendar Keeping concerning Rituals

The Aztecs were passionate about calendars through celestial mapping. Their precision scheduled their ceremonies, often times with calendars intersecting. They were timed on five calendars: a divinatory calendar of 260 days, a solar calendar of 360 days with 5 “dangerous days” at the end, a 52-year calendar, an 8-year calendar, and a 4-year calendar. Therefore, daily life was marked by rituals. It would have been a rich sensory experience to have time marked by these ceremonies because music, costumes, and dance would introduce each one. The most common sacrifice was quail, but human sacrifice was the most dramatic and valued. To further explore the trajectory, case studies are examined.

The Toxcatl Ceremony: Phase One

Introduction and Origin Mythology

Toxcatl is an example of an Early Aztec public ritual sacrifice (see image 1). It was considered a *nextlaoalli*, or “debt payment”, to the one of the most important Aztec god, Tezcatlipoca. He was considered the Creator god, was closely associated with the founding of the capital, and took the form of a jaguar. “More than anything Tezcatlipoca appears to be the embodiment of change through conflict” (Taube & Miller 1993: 164).

Ritual Performance

Each year, one captured warrior of the highest fitness and appearance was chosen to

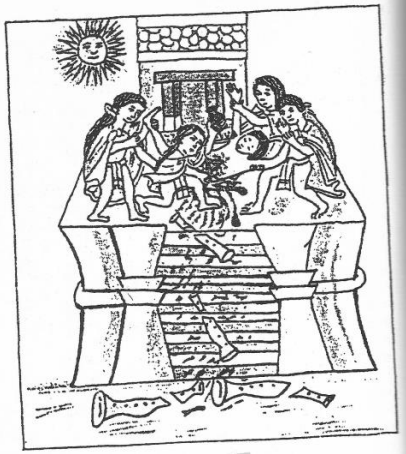


Image 1. Toxcatl (Florentine Codex 1569)

honor the “god of the gods”, Tezcatlipoca. He was chosen only if he fulfilled the long list of the god’s human form to prove his physical excellence. During his year, he was treated and lived as the god’s surrogate.

Twenty days before his sacrifice he underwent two separating transformations to reinforce his marginality. One, his long hair was cut and a tuft of hair was attached to his forehead. Two, he was given four females to procreate with to recreate the primordial coupling of the goddesses Xochiquetzal, Xilonen, Atlatonan, and Uixtociuatl. However, after entertaining everyone with his flute music and godly impersonation, his liminal year would end in a splendid way on top of the temple in the city of Chalco (image 1). Sahagún wrote, as he climbed up the temple he broke his flute and the priests “threw him upon his back on the sacrificial stone (*techatl*): then cut open his breast [with a ritual flint knife, *tecpatl*], he took his heart from him [called “precious eagle cactus fruit”], he also raised it in dedication to the sun” (Sahagún Florentine Codex 1569: 71). Now the body had been transformed and was called *ixiptla*, or “eagle man”. The innards were removed and the head was placed on the public skull rack, called Tzompantli. His

body was flayed and eaten by the nobleman and the next impersonator of Tezcatlipoca.

Analysis

This ritual offered visual narrative of the cosmos to the people. The god chose a human form, walked among them, and was then returned to the cosmos. Indeed, at the moment of sacrifice, the body became *ixiptla* and was no longer seen as only human. The god’s transformation would be reinforced by the skull rack. This ritual is extremely formal, with the choosing of next year’s warrior incarnate soon after the current *ixiptla* is sacrificed. Each warrior does not change the process, but they have a “narrowly defined opportunity for variation” (Rappaport 1979: 176) during their year by their flute skill and personality. Through this ritual, there is a living relationship to the gods during times of continual warfare. The warrior’s sacrifice placates Tezcatlipoca, a powerful god, for another harvest-rich year while also uniting the community in the extravagant year-long ceremony and, ultimately, his death. By the warrior’s sacrifice, another year of prosperity would follow.

This ritual is based on Tezcatlipoca as the creator of the Aztec world and ruler of the first sun. René Girard considers rituals to be designed to reenact traits found in their origin myths. “In the founding murder, the victim is held responsible for the crisis; the victim polarizes the growing mimetic conflicts that tear the community apart; the victim breaks the vicious cycle of violence and becomes the single pole for what then becomes a unifying, ritual mimesis” (Girard 1987: 40). In other words, in the myth, a victim(s) is (are) blamed for a problem. The sacrifice was an object, or symbol, of the two opposing sides. They were opposing because they wanted the

same limited resource; more specifically, they *learned* to want the same resource because they *observed* the other party wanting it¹. If we step back outside the rituals themselves and return to an earlier point, the rituals were an effective mechanism for legitimizing and maintaining ruling power among competing city-states in central Mesoamerica. By sacrificing the victim under the name of ritual, no opposing enemy was made. This could happen because the victim's identity was marginal to the community. (More crudely, the victim was not that important to the larger community so their death does not ruffle any feathers.) Through this process, they became a "single pole" for the hostile emotions, possible because of their detached identity to the hegemony. In a cathartic release, temporary peace was made through their public death.

Trajectory of Phases

In the Early-Aztec period, from now on referred to as Phase One, public ritual sacrifice was limited to one victim. As time continued, the number of victims increased. The total performance was drawn out, in this case it took a year; the build up to the death was just as important as the heart sacrifice. The identity of the victim was an outsider. Although he integrated into the community via the impersonation of Tezcatlipoca, he was still visually and physically separated from common life. As a second substitute victim, his marginal identity was key to a successful sacrifice because his death wouldn't create any enemies. As a reminder, the second substitution, which is made in every

consequent sacrifice after the first in the origin myth, are those who stand in for the original victim. Finally, the location of the ultimate sacrifice was in the center of town, at the top of a pyramid enhancing the drama.

In the proceeding myths, an overall pattern emerges. As myths change, the rituals change. As the need for more or less sacrifices, the myths change accordingly.

The Templo Mayor: Phase Two

Introduction

The Templo Mayor is the largest Aztec pyramid (see image 2). Construction started during the reign of Itzcoatl (1427-1400 CE) and had two main expansions by two following kings. It was built on the original shrine honoring the war god Huitzilopochtli and the rain god Tlatoc; the two twin temples reflect the pair. They were fickle gods in their nature, so they required constant appeasement through sacrifice. As stated earlier, Girard believes ritual is simply attempting to reenact the creation as closely

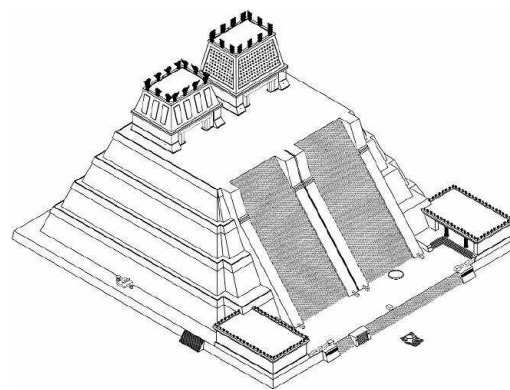


Image 2. Illustration of Templo Mayor (docplayer.es)

¹ Essentially, Girard argues that all human behavior is learned through imitation. Thus, "not only the probation but also ritual and ultimately the whole structure of religion can be traced back to the

mechanism of a quiet acquisitiveness" (Girard 1987: 18). It's an interesting thought because the Mayans are mirroring the gods' behavior.

as possible. “The genesis of provisions, of rituals, of myths and of the power of the sacred is traced from an origin in the moment of founding violence” (Girard 1987: 39). Aztec rituals were specifically designed to recreate their origins, appease the gods, legitimize the king’s rule, and reinforce the social structure.

Origin Myth

In the origin myth for the Templo Mayor, gods were living on Tlatoc’s ‘Mountain of Sustenance’. One day, Huitzilopochtli assimilated Coyolxauhqui’s aggressive and violent tendencies after the latter was dismembered. Scholars think that the pattern for decapitating warriors stems from Coyolxauhqui’s sacrifice (see Image 3). Huitzilopochtli also sacrificed all the other gods who came to the Templo Mayor. He collected their possessions and, in an act of absorbing their power, buried them. In other words, this myth established mass sacrifice and mass material burial. In these two accounts, we see a chaotic cosmic world.



Image 3. Stone disk with original coloring showing Coyolxauhqui’s sacrifice. (wikimedia)

Ritual Performance including Periphery Villages

The Templo Mayor in Mexico City is a piece of archaeology that documents mechanisms to prevent revolution. Templo Mayor “reflects their strategies, mechanisms, and performances for integrating their potent symbols with their social organization and historical developments, their theology, ontology, and social ambitions” (Carrasco 1999: 65). Excavations done in 1978-1982 found that 80 percent of the collections of goods must have come from landscapes *outside* of the core Aztec empire. Over 7,000 ritual objects were found in the 131 burial caches, and about 80 percent of them came from distant towns and city states (Carrasco 1999). Animal analyses by Leonardo López proved that the animals came from habitats not local to Tenochtitlan. Their presence shows the strength of long and short-distance relations, despite the constantly shifting alliances and rebellions. The elites, who lived in the city centers, ruled by expansion. Sometimes, when those in the peripheral towns were dissatisfied and revolted, the imperial cities had to be moved. “It suggests that centers not only dominate and control peripheries, but peripheries influence and sometimes transform centers, even a center as aggressive and dominant as Tenochtitlan” (Carrasco 1999: 66). Since every imperial center returned to ritual, the goal of the rituals were, as Girard says, to quell emotions back to what they were before the revolt. To underscore the power of constantly paying debts to the gods, large sacrifices became the most useful tool to “subdue the enemy and control the expanding periphery” (Carrasco 1999: 74). In other words, the entire Aztec dominion was managed, in part, by incorporating offerings which acted like

taxes to remind the peripheries by whom they were controlled.

An interesting example of what happened when one *didn't* follow Aztec rule is seen during the reign of Moctezuma Ilhuicamina (1440-1469) when he decided to expand the Templo Royal, a subset of the main Templo Mayor. To complete the renovation, workers were required from the city-states. One, Chalco, refused to work and rebelled. War began and Chalco was defeated. To consecrate the expansion, Chalco warriors were sacrificed. Large sacrifices composed of enemy warriors became a pattern for every expansion of the temple as a warning to unhappy periphery cities.

Working to expand the Templo as ordered by the ruler is a liturgical order. By definition, liturgical rituals are binary; either one participates or does not. In a way, this ritual (and by extension, all rituals) acts as social ritual purification because the cost of anteing is so high. In this case study, Templo Mayor makes allegiances easy to recognize because of the offering's binary quality. By not participating in the work, an offering to the god Huitzilopochtli, Chalco signaled to Aztec rulers they would not accept the responsibilities to follow. Consequently, they became participants in another phase of the renovation.

Analysis

In order for humans to appease the gods² (and consequently their own selves) war was necessary to guarantee continuing

the social norms set by the gods and enough sacrificial victims. To prevent rebellion within their own state, the cycle of war—using sacrifices to appease gods to get more bodies to sacrifice—continued.

As evidenced by Chalco, tense political relations inspired large amounts of sacrificial victims similar to Huitzilopochtli's behavior. Templo Mayor's purpose, accordingly, was to publically display the power of the Aztec through (1) the extravagance of their ritual performances, (2) the display the loyalty of peripheral provinces through large goods accumulation, (3) the mass sacrifices, and (4) reminding citizens (both in the city and outside) what will happen if rebellion occurs.

Trajectory of Phases

After the completion of Templo Mayor in 1487, rituals in Phase Two established large sacrifices at one time. In fact, in 1487 CE, Templo Mayor was completed and inaugurated with a sacrifice of 20,000 captives. The performance was quicker than Phase One, partly because of the logistics of sacrificing so many people. At this point, the identity of the victims continued to be outsiders. Their deaths were necessary to maintain good favor of Huitzilopochtli and Tlatoc. The sacrifice location could not be in a more dramatic location. They would happen at the top of the twin altars at the top of the Templo Mayor in the center of the town. This location ensured maximum visibility and dramatic, poignant effect. It signaled that the Aztec ruler was

was not only the replica of Huitzilopochtli's birth mountain, but also of Tlaloc's paradises associated with the earth" (Carrasco 1999: 69).

² Archaeologists found "many offerings dedicated to the rain god Tlaloc that symbolize the distant sacred landscapes of his mountains, paradise, caves, and seas. This suggests that the Templo Mayor

strong and god-like, himself. Furthermore, incorporating periphery cities—whether it be from labor or bodies—loyalty to the crown was enforced.

***Ullamliztli*, the Ball game: Phase Three**

Introduction

Played since the Mayas, the ball game was not just a mere sporting event; it was also an intense ritual and served multiple functions. However, the ball game was called *Ullamliztli*, and was uniquely oriented to the Aztec. *Ullamliztli* mirrored the structure of the heavens and the path the sun took each day through the underworld. Ball courts were shaped in the common “I” layout with sloping walls and had high, small stone rings attached to the wall (see Image 4). The court was usually in the center of the city,

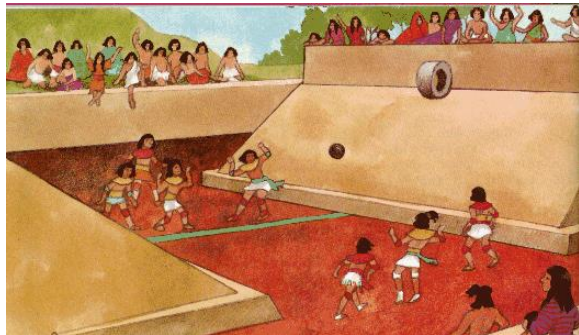


Image 4. Illustration of the ball court
(eltri.blog.hu)

underscoring the game’s importance. Beside it stood skull racks, or *tzompantli*. It was a source of fun and gambling. Because of the game’s popularity, the Codex Mendoza tells us that peripheral cities sent 16,000 rubber

balls to the Tenochtitlan annually as tribute. Rituals organized tributes; they had a very real political function. The winner would score more points³. The losers would surrender their fine goods and were sacrificed. The game is codified in a primordial myth. Even though the myth starts with the Mayan gods, the Aztecs built upon the original story and added their second piece.

Origin Myth

In Mesoamerican mythology the game is an important element in the story of the Maya gods Hun Hunahpú and Vucub Hunahpú. The pair annoyed the gods of the underworld with their noisy playing and the two brothers were tricked into descending into Xibalba (the underworld) where they were challenged to a ball game. Losing the game, Hun Hunahpú had his head cut off; a foretaste of what would become common practice for players unfortunate enough to lose a game.

[Cartwright 2013]

Later, the sons of Hun Hunahpu returned to the underworld.

Hunahpu and Xbalanque were summoned to the underworld by the gods to take part in a series of trials to test them. Their father, Hunahpu, and Uncle Vucub Hunahpu, had previously been defeated by the Lords of the

³ More specifically, “Game play consisted of two teams of players who faced each other across the center of a masonry ball court. The players could not touch the rubber ball with their hands, and the players wore heavy padding over the areas they were allowed to strike the ball; that is, their hips

and knees. Points were scored when one team failed to return the ball or when the ball was launched into the opponent’s end zone, and an ‘instant win’ would happen if a player managed to shoot the ball through a ball court ring on the side of the wall of the court itself” (Cohodas, 1975: 99).

Underworld. The Hero Twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque play the ball game against the Lords of the Underworld day after day, and they finally outwit the Lords by playing a trick on them, defeating them; the hero twins then take their place cosmologically as the sun and the moon, or the planet Venus.

[Weaver 1993: 239]

Analysis

Here we see Bell's and Bourdieu's practice theory that rituals bind "everything and everybody... into a whole that is perceived as objective and true" (Bruck 1999: 176). Together, the myth and the ball game reinforce and accredit each other. It also confirmed the social hierarchy because elites were separated from commoners. The ball game inhabited a liminal space that united people against a common enemy (i.e. the two teams and cities) while relieving tension.

It is no accident that strong parallels exist between warfare patterns and those of the competitive ball game. The pitting of teams from two communities against each other in a game in which hard-driving, dexterous action wins high stakes, frequently though not everywhere, at the risk of injury or death, all lead to the occasional substitution for the game for overt warfare... It may also function as a safety valve to relieve suppressed intercommunity conflicts, thus

operating to sublimate belligerent tendencies and directing them into harmless action.

[Stern 1949: 96-97]

Furthermore, this ritual was a physical display of the cosmos. The public could visually experience the ball moving through the three levels of the world in the three sectors of the court just as the sun and moon move through the three layers of the world every day. Skull platforms housed the losers' heads⁴. The amusement factor should not be ignored either. The rest of the community was placated by their play.

Trajectory of Phases

In Phase Three, the increasing number of victims continues as it did from Phase One to Two. In Phase Three, dozens of losers were sacrificed at a time and displayed on a skull rack. Unlike previous phases, the identity of sacrifices changed. They were not limited to captured warriors, but had a hand in their death—they competed and lost. Due to its central location, the ball court was visible after the game. The skull rack also reinforced the ritual's message after the game was over. The identity of the players, and consequently sacrifices, ranged from nobility, professional players, to captured warriors and women. The performance was shorter than Phase One, though longer than Phase Two; it only lasted the few hours of a ball game.

⁴ The skull rack was used for similar purposes in Toxcatl.

New Fire Ceremony: Phase Four

Introduction and Origin

The New Fire Ceremony (see Image 5) is a testament to diligent time-keeping, road networks, and political prowess to maintain loyalty in all Aztec regions. It happened once every fifty-two years at the overlapping of the 365-day calendar and the 260-day calendar. When these two calendars overlapped, this ceremony prevented the end of the world. There were five “dangerous days” that called for a powerful ceremony to ensure the next calendar cycle would start. More specifically it was celebrated 1351 CE (five years after the Aztec capital’s founding), 1403 CE, 1445 CE, and 1507 CE (14 years before Cortés takes the capital).

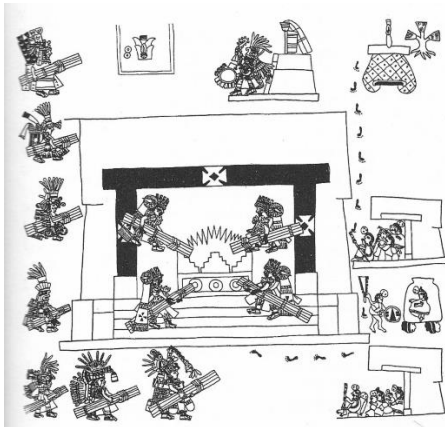


Image 5. Illustration of the New Fire Ceremony
(City of Sacrifice)

Ritual Performance

Five days before the end of the calendars, preparations of fasting, abstinence from work, bloodletting and more observances started the ceremony. The ritual reenacted the founding of Tenochtitlan, the

Aztec capital. It started at the Hill of the Star, outside of the city, but the fire was then passed along to every town in the Aztec empire.

“After household goods were destroyed and all fires extinguished, the populace waited in the darkness and watched in anticipation for the new fire to be lit on the chest of the sacrificed warrior. This fire was then taken down the mountain to the center of the city and placed in the shrine of Huitzilopochtli⁵, from whence it was then distributed to all parts of the empire” (Carrasco 1999: 28). Additionally, the ceremony connected the three regions of the world by the Fire’s movement: the upperworld (Ilhuicatl), the earthy level (Tlalticpac), and the underworld (Mictlan).

Analysis

Since the New Fire ceremony is a liturgical order (a ritual that is binary, a convention, and mandates performance), “the act of acceptance”, taken by those who perform (i.e. all civilians because they are not revolting and thereby accepting rulership), “established an obligation with respect to the convention accepted” ((Rappaport 1999, 131, 134). Furthermore, by performing the New Fire ceremony, all participants are accepting the origin myth as well. The message was brought to every home, acting like a television in today’s terms. The message was that Aztec power is strong and able to reach and control you, no matter your distance from the capital. Symbolically bringing the fire god’s fire through all three worlds demonstrates to the empire that the king is strong enough to manage; he had enough power to overcome the end of the world. This

⁵ This is the shrine, ordered by Moctezuma Ilhuicamina, that the city of Chalco decided not to

contribute workers to help build. The townspeople were later sacrificed to its opening.

ritual reminds the populace of Aztec power while reinforcing the convention of ritual, which entails the establishment of social norms.

Trajectory of Phases

The New Fire ceremony, or Phase Four, is an example of the non-linear trajectory of public ritual sacrifice in Mesoamerica. In this ceremony, there was only one victim but personal blood-letting sacrifices were done by hundreds. The longer preparation time and singular sacrifice are two anomalies⁶ in the Aztec ritual pattern; they highlight the sense of danger during the end of the scheduled world. Ritual sacrifice was an effective way to release building tension in a community since the calendars' design ran out every 52 years. The physical moving of the New Fire from the Aztec center to its peripheries indicate that the Aztec were strong enough to redistribute their cosmo-magical power. To put it differently, the mode of sacrifice changed, but the reliance on sacrifice remained integral during instability.

Rituals in the Colonial Period: Phase Five

Introduction and Ritual Performance

In the Colonial period (1539-1848), henceforth referred to as Phase Five, traditional Mesoamerican traditions mixed with Spanish Christian austerity due to the newly-arrived Spanish. Human sacrifices were condemned by the Spanish, so ceremonies were moved to secret locations,

like forest clearings. The fact that sacrificial practice endured up to the nineteenth century, even with the threat of jail, is a testament to its fundamental role in Mesoamerica. Three examples from first-hand accounts will be analyzed to show the clinging to traditional aspects.

Ritual Performance

The Juan Couoh testimony of 1562 said:

Thus they untied the youngster and threw him against the mat. Pedro Euan, taking the flint knife, made an opening on the left side of the youth's heart, and grasped the heart and cut the arteries with his knife. He gave the severed heart to the priest, Gaspar Chim, who made two cuts like a cross... then raised it on high. Then they took the boy's body and heart and his blood, as well as the idols, and all went with them to the cacique's house.

[Thompson 1966:281]

Fransico Camal testified in 1562, "another sacrifice was made within the cemetery of the church at the foot of a cross to some idols and demons which were there, in which they killed a boy... in order to sacrifice him they crucified and placed on a large cross, and they nailed his hands. Luis Nauat... opened him and took out his heart... who offered it to the demons and idols which were there (Tozzer 1941: 116).

In the Sotuta and Homun testimony, it "mentions that some of these children were unclaimed orphans or born out of wedlock,

⁶ The Templo Mayor expansions shows that large sacrifices were common during this time.

others were simply brought and donated by pious parents” (Carrasco 1999: 56). Girard emphasizes the necessity that victims must come from the fringes of society. In these sacrifices, victims are exactly that description. They are not fully integrated into the system so therefore will not create angered opponents to their death, yet they are close enough to act as a victim surrogate for all the people. Hence, a release of anxiety and emotions, especially high with the foreign invaders, are placated by the ritual sacrifice.

Analysis

Colonial rituals incorporated indigenous and Christian elements. Due to political constraints, large scale sacrifices were not possible, so the use of a single victim returned. Even with threats of prison, sacrificial rituals were still performed, emphasizing their eternal aspect. The testimonials show how the victim’s identity, the heart sacrifice, and some gods remained the same while aspects like nailing a boy to a cross, carving a cross into the heart, and the secret locations of the rituals adapted to the current political situation. Rappaport’s theory that Ultimate Sacred Postulates—the core of the religion that is vague enough to not be disproven—are insulated against perturbations with time because lower level statements, like cosmological axioms—social norms and rules that are able to change in time—are the adaptable aspects of religion. When applied to rituals, they are long-lasting because the core is so strong and unprovable while specifics, like the amount of victims and treatment of the body, bend with time.

Trajectory of Phases

Phase Five shows the indigenization of Christianity in the indigenous religion. Crucifixion elements are blending with heart sacrifice. A cross, affiliated with Christianity, would never have been a part of a ritual from Phases One to Four. Rappaport’s and Bell’s theory of long-lasting elements, and the fact that they still perform rituals, albeit to altered and added gods, supports the argument that rituals are the basic social act. Ritual still brought people together and informed them on how to live.

Limitations

This thesis acknowledges the author’s training and partiality toward modern rationalist thought. Like it sounds, modern rationalist thought is based in thinking that action can be functionally explained. In early archaeology, materials would be deemed “for ritual use” if they appeared to serve no utilitarian service. This paper assumes rituals are functional and are analyzed accordingly.

It is also important to stress the variety of sacrificial ceremonies in Mesoamerica. This thesis highlights only a few public ritual sacrifices. Carrasco lists, “decapitation, shooting with darts and arrows, drowning, burning, hurling from heights, strangulation, entombment and starvation, and gladiatorial combat” as a few from primary sources (Carrasco 1999: 83-8). This essay did not touch on self-sacrifice, but it is just as influential as public sacrifice. Although this paper focuses solely on public sacrifice, every citizen in the Aztec empire performed self-sacrifice through bloodletting as well. A future study of language might also be useful to see a fuller picture. Considering these limitations, the following elements—

the importance of the victims' identity, the importance of mimesis, evidence in language, the importance of the city—are analyzed throughout the phases.

Results

The Importance of the Victims' Identity

Because of the victim's marginal identity, no enemies are made within the community, making the emotional release possible. Most profoundly, scapegoating is “the very basis of cultural unification, the source of all rituals and religion” (Girard 1972: 302). It is the mechanism of handling peace during the cycle of community tension between the central city states and peripheral cities.

The Importance of Mimesis

There were constant power struggles between city-states during the Aztec reign in the 14th to 16th centuries. The many warring city-states learned to want power from observing others want it, otherwise known as mimetic learning. Public ritual sacrifices served to buffer the threat of instability caused by war. Moreover, the Aztec city-states learned from each other to use sacrifices, and Aztecs learned from past societies.

To once more clearly detail the changes in sacrifice Robicsek and Hales offer:

The ceremony of heart sacrifice itself underwent profound changes as the centuries passed. During the Classic period⁷ it was a lofty ceremony, characterized

by the high social standing of the shaman-sacrificer and probably of his victim as well. In the Late Post-classic period [900-1500], the number of heart sacrifices increased sharply and the ceremony was characterized by Mexican attributes, such as the flaying of the victim and occasionally the eating of his flesh. The ceremony persisted for a significant time even after the Spanish Conquest, during which period some of the attributed of Christianity were intermingled with the ancient Maya ritual.

[Robicsek & Hales 1979, 87]

The Importance of the City

By using grand temples at the center of cities, even the city design reaffirms rituals as integral to Aztec social fabric. In particular, the centrally-located pyramid, Templo Mayor, reflected the “center of the vertical structure of the cosmos that linked the human world with the commands of the supreme deity Ipalmemohuani, or the Giver of life” (Carrasco 1999). Even the city roads, aligned with the four cardinal directions, were significant because they represented the two-crossing worlds⁸. Cities were, in short, signs of the Aztec imperial power.

Evidence in Language

For the Aztec the body was the necessary ingredient for ritual. Sacrifice was engrained into the Aztec language too; sacrifice was *nextlaoalli* (“the paying of the debt”) and the victims were called

⁷ Around 250- 900 CE. Those times are outside the scope of this paper, but are included in the conclusion to highlight the trajectory of ritual sacrifice.

⁸ We touched on the multi-world view of the Aztecs in the New Fire Ceremony.

netlahualtin (restitutions”) (Carrasco 2013: 217). Aztec’s believed they were *returning* their godly energy.

Further evidence of the Aztec’s attitudes toward the human body is found in their language. Blood was called *chalciuj-atl* (precious water). Human hearts were referred to as turquoise, and war was *atl tlachinolli* (water and fire). Lastly, death on the battlefield was called *xochimiquiztli* (the flowery death). Language reflects ritual meaning just as strongly as the material remains themselves. Their meanings reinforce the personal debt and relationship each Aztec felt with the gods. The precedent for divine death was set by the gods in Coatpec, a “mythic place where a god was born who sacrificed- not just one god, but ferociously sacrificing an abundance of gods as his first act of life”; so death by sacrifice was also seen as divine. In other words, in one’s death, one is transformed beyond a human.

Summarizing the Phases

In Phase One, sacrifice was singular, required a vast amount of time and incorporated artistic skills. Toxcatl showed the long process of concentrating on one man. An embodiment of a founding god, Tezcatlipoca, the “perfect” captured warrior served as the surrogate victim for the community. The victim was not central to the community, yet resembled strong and artistic traits the Aztecs associated themselves with. In Toxcatl, the imposter is a reminder of Tezcatlipoca’s, and by extension all the gods’

and the Aztec’s social order, goodness and convention⁹.

In Phase Two, public rituals became aggrandized by sacrificing hundreds, if not thousands, of victims at a time. By the construction of Templo Mayor, sacrifice was no longer a singular victim. The location could not be more central to the town. At the top of the 60-meter-high pyramid, which was itself at the city’s heart, the sacrifices would occur. The dramatic blood would run down the steps and the skull racks would display the victim’s heads. All of these elements were deliberate choices to show Aztec, specifically the king’s, control to as many people as possible.

Phase Three still continued frequently to use public ritual sacrifice in the ball game. Furthermore, “the ritual killing of human beings, in Mesoamerica at least, is often a public performance designed to communicate and persuade the populace that commitments to cosmic warfare, debt payments to the gods, and correct gender relations are being carried out to maintain the social and cosmic order” (Carrasco 2013: 210). Carrasco’s findings lean on the precedence set by the origin myths. In other words, to maintain the usefulness of ritual sacrifice, the mode of sacrifice adapts to the specifics of the origin myth to make it applicable to the local population. Rituals are depersonalized and have many more victims than earlier periods because of increased war.

Phase Four only uses one sacrificial victim, but hundreds of people self-sacrifice

⁹ In between Phase One and Two, “the Toltec invasion brought about an infusion of foreign customs including the worship of blood-thirsty alien gods. This changed the timing and the location of the ritual as well as the socio-political content, the techniques, and

the paraphernalia” (Robicsek & Hales 1979: 50-51). Larger sacrifices were needed to continue to enjoy the gods’ reciprocity and control the expanding empire.

through blood-letting. In an exception, the New Fire ceremony is the opposite of the norm because it was performed during a time of intense uncertainty. It functioned to bring the king's cosmic power out to the peripheries.

Phase Five also only uses one sacrificial victim due to the threat of jail. The rituals were performed at the outskirts of forests or somewhere else private. The Aztec heart sacrifice and gods remained important elements, but Christian elements were also introduced. Using historical origin myths, the tradition of Aztec sacrifice continued to be used.

Conclusion

For rulers to legitimize themselves as quickly as possible and control their people, rituals were needed. Where would they find a framework for rituals? Their origin myths. In the rituals examined, there is a strong relationship between origin myth and ritual. The relationship determines the length, location, and number of sacrifices. As the length of the ritual decreased, the number of sacrifices increased and the location became more central to the local city. Mimesis encouraged the sacrifice mechanism. In all rituals, reciprocity with the gods is a key element.

Through all five phases and the two civilizations before the Aztec—namely the Olmec and Maya—ritual sacrifice remained a consistent method of ruling. Rituals “allowed public reaffirmation of power and demonstrated the prerogatives of status” (Wilkerson 1979: 110). They scheduled time and were integral to the social fabric. They demonstrated and reinforced the ruler's power while enforcing social bonding within

the city-state. Rituals were a teaching tool that diagramed the cosmos and to emulate god-like behavior in daily life. They also were a convention to maintain peripheral loyalty. Most importantly, rituals were a powerful way to deal with tension and crisis caused by war.

Ritual sacrifice maintained its power for two thousand years because the *mode* of every ritual was tailored to its origin myth, yet the liturgical conventions remained. As liturgical orders, public sacrificial rituals endured against the “variations of day-to-day behavior”, i.e. ruling changes (Rappaport 1999: 130). That is the brilliance of them. Because of this, the archaeology record reflects the abundance of public sacrifice.

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