

DRAMATIC ASPECTS OF AZTEC RITUALS

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Sometime around the year 1325 A.D. a nomadic warlike people left North America and, moving southward, settled in the swampy area of lake Texcoco, Mexico. The great god *Huitzilopochtli*, God of War, a solar being, had prophesied that they would conquer the world. It was for this reason that they had left their northern home.¹ As a result of their religion, therefore, they grew to be masters of a great part of central America and to develop a unique civilization.²

They were a proud people. They had entered into a spiritual contract and had a responsibility to collaborate with the gods to maintain cosmic order. They were dedicated to push back the powers of darkness.³ Evil and good were in conflict. Several times the powers of evil had destroyed the world. Each past effort of creation by the gods had been imperfect, and what was imperfect had been destroyed. Finally, the god *Quetzalcoatl* had gathered up the bones of the previous men, mixed a paste using cornmeal and his own blood, and fashioned

the Aztec race.⁴ Yet the world was to be destroyed again. Every fifty-two years the Aztec watched the stars and waited for the cataclysm, wondering if the gods would find the deeds of men worthy enough to take pity on mankind.⁵

Their life was overshadowed with pessimism. They must at all costs postpone the inevitable eventual destruction of the world. From birth, the Aztec was instructed that "Life is sad, doleful and full of hard toil. It is a valley of tears and as you grow up in it, you must earn your sustenance with your hands at the cost of much sorrow."⁶

Ritual was a constant immediate part of every Aztec act. Every day started with a ceremony at the great temples where priests offered hundreds of quail in the ceremony to make the sun rise.⁷ Two calendars were kept so that the observances dictated both by the special days of the gods and by the festivals of the year might be carefully and scrupulously observed. The first calendar was a ritualistic succession of days rotating in sequences of thirteen. These days marked the special observances. But the most important calendar was a solar calendar. The Aztec's month was twenty days long,

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¹ Bernardo de Sahagún, *General History of Things of New Spain*, 3 vols. (Santa Fe, New Mexico: School of American Research, 1950), I, 14.

² Alphonso Caso, *The Aztecs, People of the Sun*, Ed. Lowell Dunham (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), p. xv.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁶ Elizabeth Chestley Baity, *Americans Before Columbus* (New York: The Viking Press, 1953), p. 200.

⁷ Cottie Burland, *Magic Book from Mexico* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1953), p. 25.

eighteen months in a year, with five extra days, unlucky days, when no festivals were governed by the solar calendar.⁸

Thus, the religion of the Aztecs which governed their ceremonies was an aspect of the heavens, both of time and of space. Everything was grouped according to the four cardinal points of the compass: the calendar, the days, birth dates, gods, animals, trees, color, etc.⁹ The central tendency, the creative act, was governed by the originators of the gods, *Ometecuhli* and *Omecihuatl*. Although the Aztec priests tried to abstract their gods into a creative power, the parochial need of the common people for individual and specific gods remained very strong. They took and adapted a host of local deities until the multiplicity of gods and their various aspects became hopelessly confused.¹⁰

For the Aztec, every act: prayer, rite, deed, was an exercise of example whereby man could influence nature, insure crops, and govern animal life through its commanding god.¹¹ They tried to attract the natural forces which made human existence by the favor from the gods and which gave freedom from harm.¹²

SPECIAL FESTIVALS

Every hour and every day a god or goddess governed. During the day, thirteen hour gods held office, and nine hour gods presided over the night. The special festivals of the day and month were governed by the ritual succession of days.¹³ Every special event required sacrifices. Special ceremonies governed the honoring of individuals and the investing of rank.¹⁴ At the dedication of

⁸ George C. Vaillant, *Aztecs of Mexico* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Doran, 1941), p. 25.

⁹ Caso, p. 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹¹ Baity, p. 204.

¹² Vaillant, p. 158-169.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

¹⁴ Burland, p. 27.

temples, as many as 20,000 prisoners were sacrificed.¹⁵

At special festivals, they dedicated gifts: a rubber ball, an animal's foot, feathers, costumes, fire, copal, food, branches, wood.¹⁶ Ritual extended to libation, the act of swearing, the payment for a favor, even sweeping and cleaning.¹⁷ They also burned incense, ceremonially bathed and sprinkled themselves and others, offered blood, and burned flesh and the human heart.¹⁸

Penance—letting their own blood, self-mutilation, piercing their own tongues with spiny strings—was another way of gaining favor from the gods.¹⁹ Sometimes, self-sacrifice—ritualistic suicide—was practiced. The Aztec would rip open his own breast or cut his own throat.²⁰

Frequently, effigies were sacrificed. They would be made from the edible past of the ground seeds of the prickly poppy, the chicalote. These statues would be dressed and painted and were used in many rituals, being broken into pieces and eaten.²¹

HUMAN SACRIFICE

To the Aztec, life could continue only through the Gods. They perpetuated the Aztec race. They determined begetting and growth. When they were angry, they brought misfortune.²² The gods needed the collaboration of man. They could not subsist without nourishment. The creative force and nourishment of the gods was maintained only through the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, re *Codex Telleriano Remensis*, p. 16.

¹⁶ Edward Seler, *Codex Vaticanus* (London: Duke of Loubat, 1902), p. 45.

¹⁷ Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture*, trans. Jack E. Davis (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), p. 100.

¹⁸ de Sahagún, I, 1.

¹⁹ Vaillant, p. 207.

²⁰ Seler, p. 16.

²¹ Miguel Leon-Portilla, *The Broken Spears* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), p. 72.

²² Leon-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture*, p. 65.

magic substance, the *chakhihuatl* of life, found in the blood, but particularly in the human heart.²³

Moreover, the most powerful of all the gods, the Sun, was a result of a sacrifice, the decision of the gods to change *Huitzilopochi* into the sun. In the act of creation, the sun fought a duel over the moon and the stars. Each day, the divine combat began anew.²⁴ Victory was only possible if the sun was carried by the spirits of warriors who died in combat or on the sacrificial stone, or the spirits of women who died in childbirth. He who was sacrificed gave life to the sun.²⁵ For that reason, war was a form of worship, having as its purpose the capture of victims for sacrifice. The beginning of war was accompanied by a ritual where weapons and battle garments were dedicated and sent to the enemy as a declaration of war.²⁶

Paradise was reserved for those who nourished the sun. *Tonatiuhichan*, the eastern Paradise, was reserved for sacrificial victims and for warriors who died in combat. The Western Paradise was the abode of mothers who died in childbirth.²⁷

The brutal sacrifices of human captives, performed repeatedly for routine occasions, were regarded as a kindness and a public service. The priests who tore life from the bodies of their victims were actually "virtuous, humble, and peaceful; considerate, prudent, loving and compassionate; a friend to all and devout to their gods."²⁸

THE DRAMATIC STRUCTURE OF THE MONTHLY FESTIVALS

It might be said that the Aztec Festivals were conducted in three parts

²³ Caso, p. 13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁵ Seler, p. 183.

²⁶ Leon-Portilla, *The Broken Spears*, p. xxvi.

²⁷ Caso, p. 59.

²⁸ Laurette Séjourné, *Burning Water* (London: Thomas and Hudson, 1956), p. 30.

which we could call "the Incarnation," "The Sacrifice," and the "Epiphany." Sometimes, added to this would be a kind of an "Agon" where a struggle was preliminary to the sacrifice.²⁹

The "Incarnation" starts with the dedication or blessing of the sacrificial victims. The victims were costumed and made-up or painted to symbolize the god for whom the sacrifice was intended. Libation was made. Then for a period of time, sometimes brief, sometimes eight days, and in one case a year, feasting, drinking, singing and dancing paid homage to the incarnation of the victim.³⁰ At most festivals, however, the prisoner was simply dressed and paraded through the streets. Impersonations at various times represented various aspects of the myth. The crowd followed the costumed procession, singing, calling out, and dancing.³¹

The "Sacrifice" began when the procession arrived at the temple steps. The sacrificial victims, representing the gods themselves, ascended the steps in various ways. Sometimes they were carried up in litters. Sometimes they were carried on the shoulders of the priests. In other sacrifices, depending on the amount of cooperation attained from the victim, they were dragged fighting and struggling or fainting with fear. At other times, they marched proudly up the three flights. In the case of the ceremony, *Toxcatl*, the victim voluntarily performed ritualistic flute-playing, symbolically breaking his flute as he ascended the steps.³²

There were several kinds of sacrifices. The standard offering was the presentation of the victim's heart. The number of priests involved varied from four to six. Taking the victim by his arms and legs, they bent him over backwards on

²⁹ Seler, p. 177.

³⁰ Vaillant, p. 202.

³¹ de Sahagún, I, 2.

³² *Ibid.*, II, 9.

the sacrificial stone, the *techcatl*, bowing up his chest. The sacrificing priest took the flint sacrificial knife, and ripped open a hole in the proper place to reach in and tear the beating heart from the victim's body. The most important part of the ceremony, however, was the dedication of the magic substance in the blood and the heart. The heart, presented to the sun, was placed in a special container. Sometimes it was burned. At the ceremony to the rain gods, the hearts of the victims were splashed into lake Texcoco.³³

Perhaps to distribute the magic nourishing substance in the blood, perhaps to display the body, the corpse was rolled down the temple steps.³⁴

Victims were sacrificed in other ways. The young girls representing the young maize goddess were decapitated.³⁵ In the ceremonies to the god of fire, the victims were scorched before being sacrificed.³⁶ In part of the ceremony to *Xipe totec*, victims were tied to a scaffold and pierced with spears and arrows, allowing the blood to spill upon the ground which absorbed its magic substance.³⁷ A gladiatorial sacrifice took place for the god of rain as well as for the god of war. Eminent enemy warriors were tethered to a stone, given dummy weapons, and engaged in duels with a succession of adversaries until they were slain or exhausted; then they were sacrificed.³⁸

At the bottom of the steps began the ceremonies of the "Epiphany." The bodies of the god impersonators were symbolically reincarnated in various ways. The most common way was dismemberment and cannibalism. The head was severed and placed in the skull rack.

³³ *Ibid.*, II, 11.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 23.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, II, 14.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 17.

³⁷ James D. Hart, *Mexico; Ancient and Modern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), p. 4.

³⁸ Vaillant, p. 200.

The flesh, especially the strong arms, legs, and thighs, were stewed with ears of corn. Those responsible for the victim—his captors—and those who presented him for sacrifice—chiefs, dignitaries and their families—ceremoniously ate the corn and the flesh. They believed that the victims were an incarnation of the gods. By eating their flesh, they absorbed the virtues of the gods.³⁹

In the case of the ceremonies to the god *Xipe totec*, and to the goddess *Plazoteol*, the skin of the victim was flayed from the sacrificed body before the flesh was eaten. In these ceremonies, the skin was worn by chosen young men who then became the reincarnation of the god or goddess.⁴⁰ Those representing *Xipe* wore the skin for twenty days and only after depositing the hardened, decaying costume in caves could they undergo ceremonial washing.⁴¹

Part of the final feasting included ritualistic drunkenness,⁴² mock battles,⁴³ parades and offering of flowers,⁴⁴ games,⁴⁵ monster dances,⁴⁶ teasing and beating of women,⁴⁷ and various other representations.⁴⁸

MONTHLY SACRIFICES

The first, fourth, sixth, and sixteenth months were dedicated to the rain gods. Children, chosen because they had a circling double crown of hair, symbolizing whirlpools, were costumed as the rain gods, carried in a litter weeping to the sacrifice. The more they cried about their coming death, the more rain would fall.⁴⁹ The rain gods were kind. They made the corn grow. But when angered

³⁹ Seler, p. 54.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

⁴¹ de Sahagún II, 5.

⁴² *Ibid.*, II, 13.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, II, 3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 16.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, II, 17.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 22.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 31.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 33.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, II, 1.

they could unleash lightning and cause drought or flood.⁵⁰

In the second month, the complex ceremony to *Xipe totec*, "Our Lord the Flayed One," began, to extend into the third month. *Xipe*, the red *Tezcatlipoca*, god of spring, of jewelers, and of sickness, represented the death of winter and the rejuvenation of spring. He also represented victory over illness, deformity and skin disease. Many men were flayed, and many warriors wearing the skins impersonated *Xipe* and conducted ceremonial singing throughout the night for a whole month.⁵¹ This was also the month of the scaffold sacrifice, the "shooting to death with arrows." Representing the male and female forces that perpetuated all life, a girl was sacrificed at the altar and a man was tied to a scaffold and shot with arrows, his blood spilling the magic fluid on the ground.⁵²

The fifth month was noteworthy for its extended impersonation and ritual. A special prisoner, chosen for his handsome appearance, was required to represent *Tezcatlipoca*, god of night, evil, and misery. He was a patron of sorcerers and warriors, whose fetish was the flint knife.⁵³ Given a year's instruction in gracious and noble manners, and in the playing of the clay flute, he had a fine entourage who treated him as the god incarnate. In the last month before the ceremony he was arrayed in battle dress and married to four wives representing the goddesses of providence. For a month he lived in connubial bliss. Then his wives and entourage left him. Four pages kept vigil. On the day of the sacrifice he ascended the steps alone, breaking his flutes as he moved upwards. Before the sacrifice, he was deprived of the last of

his fine costumes, and, naked, his heart was torn out.⁵⁴

In four of the months, goddesses were impersonated, and women were sacrificed. The seventh month honored the goddess of salt, the eighth honored *Xilonen*, the goddess of tender corn, the eleventh honored the mother of gods, and the seventeenth honored "our mother" *Tonan*.⁵⁵

The ninth, fourteenth, and fifteenth months were dedicated to the Sun God, *Huitzlopachtli*, the god of war. Animals and weapons were blessed. A rhythmic march and a snake dance were also featured. In the ninth month the festival ended with an offering of flowers. In the fourteenth month the god *Mixcoateopan* and his goddess consort were sacrificed. The fifteenth month featured a mock battle.⁵⁶

The tenth, twelfth, and eighteenth months were dedicated to the fire god *Xiuhtectuli*, or his aspect *Huehuetēol* "the old god," the Aztec god of fire. To him, in these months, many slaves were scorched and sacrificed. A partial anesthetic was used, and the victims were thrown into the flames, struggling, until their skin blistered and peeled. They were fished out with hooks, still alive, and sacrificed.⁵⁷

After the fire sacrifice an effigy was made. A tall tree was chosen and stripped of its branches. Properly placed, the effigy was tied at the top, ropes extending from it. At a signal all the youths rushed forward and competed in climbing to the top where the image had been placed. The first to reach it broke the image, made from an edible paste, and flung the pieces to the crowd to be eaten. When the victor descended, he was honored and paraded like a hero.⁵⁸

⁵⁰ Caso, p. 43.

⁵¹ de Sahagún, II, 4.

⁵² Hart, p. 4.

⁵³ Caso, p. 27.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵⁸ Caso, p. 70.

Effigies were also eaten in the thirteenth and sixteenth months. In the ceremony to *Chalchiuhtli*, the water goddess, an image on a frame was carried in the parade prior to the sacrifice.⁵⁹

Games were also associated with the gods. A kind of soccer-basketball game was a religious performance and the ball court was a kind of temple.⁶⁰ The *Volador* was also a type of agricultural magic to promote the growth of crops. Four men, dressed as bird gods, represented the four winds. Using ropes attached to a frame at the top of a high pole, the unwinding of the ropes would cause the men to "fly" around the pole.⁶¹

The last five days of the year, the *Nemontemi*, were days unlucky for ceremonies. Without care, pregnant women would change to wild animals and sleeping children would turn into rats.⁶²

IMPERSONATIONS

All the ceremonies required that the presiding god be impersonated. Each god was identified by his costume and his makeup. Various devices were used to obtain the cooperation of the sacrificial victim. At times the honor and responsibility of the office was enough. However, the impersonator of the fertility goddess was deceived into believing she had been chosen for the evening by an important noble to be his sexual partner.⁶³

Several dances involved impersonations. In the twelfth and eighteenth months the myth of the creation of fire was enacted with dancers chosen to represent the gods. In the twelfth month the "arrival of the gods" was enacted. *Huehuetol*, "the old god," was the last to arrive. He moved very slowly like an

aged man.⁶⁴ A similar dance was performed in the eighteenth month called "the dance of the lords."⁶⁵ In the eighth month the women impersonated the myth of *Xirolonen*, the young maize goddess, in dance and song.⁶⁶

The feasting at these occasions was extensive. The revels included ritualistic drunkenness honoring the gods.⁶⁷ *Xochipilli*, the prince of flowers and the god of pleasure, feasting, and frivolity, presided.

MUSIC, DANCE, AND SONG

The god *Ueuecoyotl* was patron of Aztec music, dance and song. Music was taught in a special building called the *Cuicacalli*. Musical instruments were mostly woodwinds and percussion instruments: bone and clay flutes, conch shells, wooden whistles; skin drums, shell drums, wooden drums, rasps and rattles. Since the flutes were not toned to any scale, the melody elements were subordinated to the rhythmical.⁶⁸ Music was used mostly as an accompaniment for singing and dancing. Every ceremony required singing, dancing, and chanting for a period usually of five days but sometimes for a whole month.⁶⁹

Xochipilli, prince of flowers, was also the patron of dance. Everyone was involved in the dancing, even the highest officials. In the "Feast of Lords" the dance involved the entire population from twilight to dawn.⁷⁰ Dancing, therefore, was both an amusement and a rite. It was a way of serving the gods.⁷¹

A dancing rod frequently beat out the time on the ground, and steps were in-

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 22.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, II 33.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 14.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 11.

⁶⁸ Vaillant, p. 243.

⁶⁹ de Sahagún, II, 5.

⁷⁰ Jacques Soustelle, *The Daily Life of the Aztec* (London: Weidfeld and Nicolson, 1955), p. 145.

⁷¹ Fr. Toribio Motolinia, *Memoriales* (Mexico: Pedro Robrado, 1903), p. 344.

⁵⁹ de Sahagún, I, 7.

⁶⁰ Caso, p. 80.

⁶¹ Hart, p. 4.

⁶² Vaillant, p. 200.

⁶³ de Sahagún, II, 19.

tricate and highly advanced. Mythical events in the lives of the gods were acted out, for frequently the dances contained pantomime and demonstrations.⁷²

Many forms of dances are recorded. The warriors in the battle dances danced in pairs. Sometimes they were joined by women.⁷³ Modified round dances are recorded. In one dance huge groups formed concentric circles according to rank. The further away from the center, the less important and younger the dancers became. In the ceremony of the fifteenth month a snake dance was performed in which the celebrants wound in and out in single file.⁷⁴ In the seventeenth month the head of the decapitated impersonator of the goddess *Tonan* was carried in a file dance.⁷⁵ Only the old women sang and danced in the seventh month.⁷⁶ There was also a bachelor warriors dance, and a sweeping and cleaning dance.⁷⁷

The songs were mostly sacred hymns paying homage to the gods and recalling their glorious deeds, or hymns soliciting their favor.⁷⁸ Some songs were recitations explaining the dances, and some required mime by the singers themselves. Some songs were sung for their own sake. Some were couched in esoteric language not familiar to all Aztecs.⁷⁹

DRAMA

Most drama was a combination of recital, song, dance, and music. Many of the hymns were written in dialogue form with recited exchange between the characters of the drama and a choir. These were formal presentations. Each section had a ritual of acting or a masked dance.⁸⁰

⁷² Vaillant, p. 168.

⁷³ Soustelle, p. 46.

⁷⁴ de Sahagún, II, 27.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, II, 31.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 13.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 15.

⁷⁸ Caso, p. 75.

⁷⁹ Soustelle, p. 240.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 237-240.

There were special dramas performed in honor of *Quetzalcoatl*, the god of the wind and the hero-founder of agriculture and industry. The characters in these dramas were grotesque, deformed people and impersonations of animals. Dialogue was highly spontaneous. In a hunting scene the sharp repartée between the hunter and the clever animals amused the spectators.⁸¹

Clowns were a common part of the feasting and drinking rituals. "Young jesters in their cups cut capers and amused the people."⁸²

Ceremonies were frequent and long. Obviously, time, training, and elaborate preparation were taken to insure that each detail was carefully and scrupulously observed.⁸³ Since each month called for one or two different ceremonies, priests and priestess specialists learned different requirements of the cult ritual. Each group underwent long and careful training.⁸⁴

Dance was an activity involving everybody, for all were given some part in the complicated ritual. A collective ecstasy would seize the crowd as it sang and danced. However, many representations required specialist actors. Spectators watched, responding freely, often being involved in the dialogue.⁸⁵

DRAMATIC LITERATURE

Much Aztec writing was merely record keeping. The glyphs and pictures were clumsy and inefficient. As a result, a system of memorization was employed to preserve the ancient hymns, myths, epic narratives, and dramatic compositions. There were many types of literature: lyric, epic, and dramatic poetry; history and legends, as well as moral teachings.⁸⁶

⁸¹ Caso, p. 78.

⁸² de Sahagún, I, 22.

⁸³ Soustelle, p. 147.

⁸⁴ Caso, p. 82.

⁸⁵ de Sahagún, II, 83.

⁸⁶ Leon-Portilla, p. 28.

The language of the drama could not have been neglected because a great oral tradition had grown up. The Mexicans were proud of the *Nahuatl* language. It was easy to pronounce, and it was harmonious and rhythmical with distinct, clearly heard sounds. Its structure was efficient and it had a rich vocabulary full of abstract terms, traditional rhetoric, and poetic metaphor.⁸⁷ Their councils and special events were filled with uncountable speeches full of stylized eloquence and symbolic tradition.⁸⁸

DRAMATIC ELEMENTS

The most primitive elements of drama are all present in the Aztec ceremonies. The simplest were spontaneous expression and spontaneous enactment. In addition, there were complex rituals. From exuberant self-expression to elaborate form and presentation, the drama communicated what was important to a people. The purpose was largely magical: an attempt to prevent disaster or to influence the environment favorably through ceremony.

The drama was obviously evolving. A growth of specialization and spectator involvement was taking place. More and more elaborate demands, both time-consuming and requiring of skill were made upon the specialists. More and more planning, organization, and prep-

aration was needed. As a result, participation was becoming both appreciative and esoteric in its effect. What eventual form the drama would have taken is uncertain. The ever increasing need for human sacrifice was a course of diminishing returns. The Aztecs could not maintain this pace indefinitely. These ceremonies would either destroy themselves or move toward some acceptable substitute. It is possible that this latter form would have evolved a drama of enactment, where hymns, dance, and recitation would present the content of the ritual in a meaningful and satisfying way without retaining the explosively destructive need for human sacrifice.

No matter how the drama might have evolved, the fact remains that total involvement made potent use of the dramatic energies and the needs of the Aztec race. This very fact itself probably explains why drama as we know it did not exist. Every month of the year the Aztec was involved in a theatrical series of ceremony. The need for dramatic expression was exhausted by the ceremony, dance, and recitation performed in the constant succession of ritual. The involvement was a total involvement. The effect was intense. It was undoubtedly meaningful. No matter what form it might have moved toward, it would surely have retained its meaning and involvement. It is possible that elaborate dramatic presentations would have resulted.

⁸⁷ Soustelle, pp. 232-233.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 143.