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AZTEC HUMAN
SACRIFICE AS
EXPIATION

Although the ideology of Aztec human sacrifice has drawn the attention of the scholarly world for more than a century, the proposed interpretations mostly have been restricted to what is explicitly stated in the sources: that the hearts of the victims nourished the gods and, in particular, the sun, and that certain victims embodied gods. Sir James Frazer, in particular, gained many adherents, first with his insistence on the “killing of the god,” “nowhere carried out so systematically and on so extensive a scale” and intended “as a means of perpetuating the divine energies in the fullness of youthful vigour,” that is, to revivify the gods; second, by establishing a link with the deities called, later on, “dema”; and, finally, by his “energetic” theory, which sees the sun as the source of all energy and which needs feeding with lives.¹ These ideas return constantly later on, for example, in the works of Seler and Preuss around the turn of the century, or of Mircea Eliade, who explains that the regeneration rituals “obviously” repeat primordial acts, which is sometimes true. In France, Frazer’s, Seler’s, and Preuss’s interpretations were diffused by Soustelle, who added the dubious thesis that nomads belonging to solar cults had superimposed their practice of human sacrifices on the agrarian rituals of Central Mexico’s autochthons. More recently, Christian Duverger and Yólotl González Torres once again propose the energetic

¹ Sir James Frazer, *Le rameau d’or*, 4 vols. (Paris: Laffont, 1981–84), 1:199, 3:250–55, 3:586–603, 3:664. For dema deities, see L. Lévy-Bruhl, *La mythologie primitive: Le monde mythique des Australiens et des Papous* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1935), pp. 27–34; Adolphe E. Jensen, *Mythes et cultes chez les peuples primitifs* (Paris: Payot, 1954).

theory, the first author explaining in his essay that feeding the diurnal and nocturnal sun is the ultimate rationale for all Aztec human sacrifices, while Gónzalez adds other Frazerian interpretations. In her new and controversial book *Time and Sacrifice in the Aztec Cosmos*, Kay A. Read also stresses the energetic-alimentary aspect, as did Clendinnen before her.²

It thus appears that recent research on sacrifice tends to neglect its exceptional variety and its rich scope of meaning and to concentrate on a few arbitrarily privileged sources. Humans were put to death not only by excision of the heart (usually followed by decapitation) but also by decapitation (sometimes followed by heart extraction), having the throat cut, being thrown into fire (mostly followed by heart extraction), being scratched, followed by heart extraction and flaying in the so-called gladiatorial sacrifice, being shot with arrows (usually followed by heart extraction), drowning, being buried alive, and being hurled down from the top of a pole or a pyramid. Less common were deaths by bludgeon strokes, stoning, impaling, tearing out the entrails, having the roof of a house falling down on victims, and squeezing them in a net.³ For most of these types of immolation, the prototypical, mythical act reactualized in ritual is clearly recognizable; for others, information is lacking. Reenacted myths help us to understand the rationale and the hidden or overt ends of those sacrifices that, together with the consecutive cannibalistic meals, constituted the culminating points of the great sacred dramas that were the Aztec festivals.⁴ These rituals helped the cosmos function by reenacting the creation of the world and the birth of Venus-Maize, then assisted the creation of the sun that vanquished the forces of darkness in the underworld and rose bringing the day and the rainy season assimilated to it, by erecting trees that supported the sky, by nourishing the

² Eduard Seler, *Gesammelte Abhandlungen zur Amerikanischen Sprach- und Altertumskunde*, 5 vols. (Berlin: Asher, 1902–23), 4:57, 1:442, 2:800, 4:448; Konrad Th. Preuss, "Der Ursprung der Menschenopfer in Mexico," *Globus* 86 (1904): 105–19, "Phallische Fruchtbarkeitsdämonen als Träger des altmexikanischen Dramas," *Archiv für Anthropologie* 1 (1903): 130–88; Mircea Eliade, *Traité d'histoire des religions* (Paris: Payot, 1949), p. 292; Jacques Soustelle, *La pensée cosmologique des anciens Mexicains* (Paris: Hermann, 1940); Christian Duverger, *La fleur létale: Economie du sacrifice aztèque* (Paris: Seuil, 1979); Yólotl Gónzalez Torres, *El sacrificio humano entre los mexicas* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica and Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1985); Kay Almere Read, *Time and Sacrifice in the Aztec Cosmos* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998); or Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

³ Some of these types of sacrifices are enumerated in Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, trans. and ed. C. E. Dibble and A. J. O. Anderson, 13 vols. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1950–82), bk. 4, chap. 27, p. 93.

⁴ The word "sacred" is used with no other signification than the common one of "1. Consecrated to a god; 2. Having to do with religion" (*Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language* [New York: Popular Library, 1973]).

gods and in particular Sun and Earth, by making offerings to propitiate the earth and rain deities, the Tlaloques, and so forth. Reenacting the founding myths implied the ritual killing of victims impersonating dema and other deities whose death in primeval times had made the earth, the sun and moon, the stars, and maize and other useful plants appear. Helping the universe to function sometimes called for sacrifices in which deities were rejuvenated or revitalized through their own death (via impersonators) or through oblations of human blood.

The multifarious Aztec sacrifice seems to revolve around two poles: the ritual killing of the deity and the alimentary sacrifice to nourish the gods. The two main categories of victims, bathed (i.e., purified) slaves who impersonated deities and prisoners of war, do substantiate this division to some degree, but there were many intermediate situations. For instance, killed deities could also feed other gods, and the prisoners of war actually represented lesser and rather impersonal spirits or deities called *Mimixcoas*. A victim could impersonate or represent a deity, a mythical hero, food, game, fecundating fruit or seed, maize, a heavenly body, or several of these simultaneously, or more simply play the part of a messenger, a companion to a deceased, or a base, a "litter" for more important sacrificial victims. Obviously, a single sacrifice could have several layers of meanings: for example, reactualizing mythical killings, rejuvenating deities, or revitalizing them and nourishing other deities.⁵ But apart from these cosmic ends, sacrifices could at the same time pursue the whole range of more usual intentions, such as placating or conciliating deities in order to obtain something; transmitting messages to the other worlds; accompanying the deceased to the hereafter; consecrating or strengthening certain places, altars, buildings, or persons; and expiating transgressions or sins to win a glorious or happy afterlife.⁶ My purpose in this article is to demonstrate that the more fundamental meaning

⁵ When a woman impersonating *Toci-Tlalteotl*, the earth deity, was killed in *Ochpaniztli*, the myth reactualized was that of the creation of the earth by the tearing apart of *Tlalteotl*, from whose body useful plants were born. Her ritual killing was like a wedding; the impersonator was killed and skinned, and a new, vigorous impersonator henceforth played her part, mimicking the hierogamy of heaven and earth and the delivery of maize. So here we have the themes of reenacting myth in order to reproduce and reactualize the primeval event (but in a different, actualized version) of the rejuvenation of the earth deity who is to give birth to maize once again. Other victims killed represented water and maize. Their deaths rejuvenated what the deities stood for, but at the same time their hearts were offered to the sun to nourish it. And, as we shall see, there was also the expiation aspect.

⁶ See J. Haekel, s.v. "Menschenopfer," in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* 7 (1962). I do not hesitate to use the word "sin," first, because its general sense can be "any offense or fault" (*Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*), second, because even in the Christian sense, it encompasses transgressions without any knowledge of good or evil—original sin—and third, because Mesoamerican mythology presents several transgressions that very much resemble the biblical ones (Genesis), as Spanish friars immediately realized.

and end of Aztec sacrifice was expiation of sins or transgressions in order to deserve a worthy afterlife, and that the alimentary or energetic interpretation is only a late and derived one that never managed to relegate the other meanings.

The centrality of expiation has previously been emphasized. More than a century ago, in his book on ancient Mexican civilization and history, Orozco y Berra outlined what was at that time a current theory on the evolution of sacrifice and insisted that its core is atonement and that the victim serves as a substitute for the sinner. Unfortunately, he neglected to apply this theory to the Aztecs. In the fifties and sixties, Laurette Séjourné labored to defend the idea that through penance and sacrifice the ancient Mexicans sought to expiate their sins, thus liberating their soul or spirit, imprisoned in the human body (more precisely, the heart) since conception, but she neglected to stave her intuitions with solid evidence.⁷

That the alimentary aspect is not primordial or essential is demonstrated by an interesting Mixtec myth, the only one we have on the origins of offerings and sacrifice. At the beginning, the supreme creator couple created a paradise and begot two sons who honored their parents by offering them incense of powdered tobacco. After this first offering, the sons created a garden for their pleasure and a beautiful meadow full of things necessary for their “offerings and sacrifices.” Later on, “to further oblige them [their parents] more” so that they would create the sky and the earth, they drew blood from their ears and tongues and scattered it on trees and plants, “and they always showed submission to the gods their parents and attributed them more power and divinity than they had between themselves.” We here have an evolution from “immaterial” offerings (incense) to products of the meadow (flowers and plants, possibly also animals), and finally blood.⁸ Apparently the offering by the creatures of their own blood rather than of flowers or animals signifies only their recognition that they owe their lives to their creators and are ready to give it back. What is very clear in this myth is that the mechanism of offerings and sacrifices is not to feed the creators—who existed before without being

⁷ Manuel Orozco y Berra, *Historia antigua y de la conquista de México*, 4 vols. (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1960), 1:160–66; Alma Elisabeth del Río, *Bases psicodinámicas de la cultura azteca* (Mexico City: Costa-Amic, 1973), p. 257; Laurette Séjourné, *Pensamiento y religión en el México antiguo* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1957).

⁸ A similar evolution with first offerings of incense, then of animals, and finally of humans is mentioned in the part of the *Popol Vuh* dedicated to the migrations of the Quichés: *The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings*, trans. and ed. D. Tedlock (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), pp. 185–87. In this source with strong Nahuatl influence, the humans are said to have been created to “provide and nurture” the gods (p. 163). On this influence, see M. Graulich, “El Popol Vuh en el Altiplano Mexicano,” *Memorias del segundo Congreso Internacional de Mayistas* (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Filológicas, Centro de Estudios Mayas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1995), pp. 117–30.

fed by anyone—but to humble one's self, thus acknowledging one's inferiority. Only by behaving in this way may creatures expect to obtain something from their parents.⁹

A few words about the sources at our disposal are necessary before we examine the prototypical myth of human sacrifice. Not only are they scarce and fragmentary—all the myths put together would fill only a small volume—but most often they are deprived of any context: only two sources, the *Leyenda de los Soles* (in nahuatl) and the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas*, offer a complete connected cosmogony, and both are late products of Motecuhzoma II's program of religious reforms.¹⁰ More important still, our information on myth and ritual has never been provided by priests or other specialists who speculated on the matter: the few explanations that exist appear to be disputable popular ones—as though we tried to fathom the mysteries of Christianity only by interrogating the person on the street—or are comments made by the Spanish monks who registered the myths.

THE "CREATION OF THE SUN AND THE MOON"

The well-known myth "of the creation of sun and moon" at Teotihuacan is illustrative in this respect because its main subject is very different from the one indicated by Aztec informants. According to Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's version, when everything was still in darkness, the gods gathered in Teotihuacan and asked themselves who would make the sun and dawn appear. Tecciztecatl, "he of the conch-shell," volunteered, and the gods chose Nanahuatl, "the one with buboes," who accepted the task happily. A great fire was lit and Tecciztecatl and Nanahuatl did penance for five days. Everything Tecciztecatl had was luxurious—his "bloody thorns," for instance, were coral—while Nanahuatl made only humble but true offerings—instead of coral he offered his own blood, while his incense was the scabs from his pustules. After doing penance they put on their sacrificial adornments, Tecciztecatl those of a bathed slave and Nanahuatl those of a warrior. At midnight, Tecciztecatl tried to jump into the fire but was forced to back off from the intensity of the heat four times. Then Nanahuatl jumped into the brazier, followed later on by Tecciztecatl, and both were consumed. (The *Histoire du Méchique* indicates that

⁹ Fray Gregorio García, *Origen de los Indios del Nuevo Mundo e Indias Occidentales* (Madrid: Martínez Abad, 1729). In a Maya myth the creator had thirteen children, of which the older ones sought to create human beings without their parents' permission ("they became proud") but could produce only common household vessels and were thrown into hell. But the younger ones humbled themselves and therefore were able to create. M. Graulich, "Autosacrifice in Postclassic Ancient Mexico," presents other myths of self-sacrifice (e.g., Quetzalcoatl in Tollan), in which there is no question of feeding the gods.

¹⁰ M. Graulich, *Montezuma ou l'apogée et la chute de l'empire aztèque* (Paris: Fayard, 1994), pp. 97–126.

Nanahuatl went down to the underworld, from whence he returned with rich spoils.) Then he emerged as the sun. (In the *Leyenda*, when he reaches the sky, the supreme creators solemnly enthrone him.) Tecciztecatl-Moon also rose, shining with equal brilliance. One of the gods dimmed the moon's face by striking it with a rabbit. (According to the *Leyenda*, Tecciztecatl was derisively enthroned in the west by demons of darkness, the Tzitzimime.)

The sun and moon remained motionless and the anxious gods asked, "How will we live? The sun does not move! Shall we live among the commoners? But all right, may he be vivified by us, may we all die." Ehecatl-Wind sacrificed them by extracting their hearts to feed the sun, but still the sun did not move until Ehecatl blew him into motion. (In the *Leyenda*, the Sun treats the gods as though he had vanquished them and exacts their blood.)

The myth certainly explains how the sun and the moon came into being, but it is immediately evident that the central theme is death, victory over death, and a return to a more glorious, celestial life.

It also presents the first human or, rather, divine sacrifices, those of Nanahuatl and Tecciztecatl, who willingly jump into the fire, followed by the quite different immolations of the gods. Strangely enough, the latter ones are more readily considered to be *the* prototypical sacrifices, and these are the ones on which the "energizing-feeding" theory is grounded. However, the prototypical sacrifices are and must be those of Nanahuatl and Tecciztecatl, first, because most of the independent versions of the myth do not mention a slaying of the gods;¹¹ second, because Nanahuatl and Tecciztecatl ostensibly represent the two great categories of victims, ritually bathed slaves and captured warriors; and, third, because the logic of the complete story implies it, as will be seen further on.

If we examine the myth of Teotihuacan as narrated above, obscurities and inconsistencies appear that apparently have left the investigators mostly untroubled. What are the gods doing on earth and in darkness? Why are they material and why is one of them bubonous, like a human

¹¹ The killing of the gods is reported in Sahagún, *Florentine Codex* (n. 3 above); in the *Leyenda de los Soles*, in *History and Mythology of the Aztecs: The Codex Chimalpopoca*, trans. J. Bierhorst, 2 vols. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992); and in Fray Gerónimo de Mendieta, *Historia Eclesiástica Indiana*, 4 vols. (Mexico City: Chávez Hayhoe, 1945). It is not mentioned in the "Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas," in *Nueva colección de documentos para la historia de México*, ed. J. García Icazbalceta (Mexico City: Chávez Hayhoe, 1941); the "Histoyre du Méchique," ed. E. de Jonghe, *Journal de la Société des Américanistes de Paris*, N.S. 2 (1905): 1-41; Hernando Ruiz de Alarcón, "Tratado de las supersticiones y costumbres gentílicas que hoy viven entre los indios naturales de esta Nueva España," *Anales del Museo Nacional de Historia* 6 (1892): 123-224; and Diego Muñoz Camargo, "Descripción de la ciudad y provincia de Tlaxcala," in *Relaciones geográficas del siglo XVI: Tlaxcala, tomo primero*, ed. R. Acuña (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1984).

punished by a god for having sinned?¹² How and why have they become mortal? Why do they have to die, in a fire that destroys the body, or under the sacrificial knife? Why do they fear to have to live among humans, on earth, when the sun does not move? And what about that erratic necessity to feed the sun? To answer these questions we need to turn to the context of the myth, a context absent in all but one version and absent in all the versions used by current research. This version was copied by Mendieta and Torquemada from Fray Andrés the Olmos's lost *Antigüedades*, one of our most ancient sources, based on inquiries made in cities like Mexico, Texcoco, Tlaxcala, Huexotzinco, Cholula, Tepeaca, and Tlalmanalco. The author mentions the diversity of beliefs in the different cities, but he insists that most of them were in agreement on the following myth.

THE HEAVENLY CITY

In heaven there was a marvelous city where the gods lived with their parents, the supreme creators, Ometecuhli and Omecihuatl ("Lord" and "Lady Two"). Once upon a time, Omecihuatl gave birth to a flint knife, which the frightened gods threw from heaven, and it fell and landed in Chicomoztoc, "Seven Caves." Sixteen hundred gods sprang forth from it. Seeing that they were "fallen and banished" (caídos y desterrados) on earth, they implored their mother, who had "rejected and exiled them" (desechado de sí y desterrado) for permission to create people who would serve them. She answered that, if they had behaved properly they would still be with her, but they did not deserve it; and if they wanted servants, they would have to go to the underworld and ask the lord of the dead for bones or ashes of previous humans. Then follows the myth of the creation of humankind and next that of the birth of the sun and the moon in Teotihuacan.¹³

The flint knife containing fire that Omecihuatl gives birth to symbolizes one of the fecundating sparks that the supreme couple drills in the highest heaven in order to send them to women when they conceive.¹⁴ The flint lands in Chicomoztoc, "Seven Caves," a reference to the seven

¹² For example, Fray Diego Durán, *Historia de los indios de la Nueva España e Islas de la Tierra Firme*, ed. A. M. Garibay, 2 vols. (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1967), chap. 16, 1:156; Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, bk. 3, chap. 2, p. 11.

¹³ Mendieta, 1:83–84; Fray Juan de Torquemada, *Monarquía Indiana*, 3 vols. (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1969), 2:37–38, 76–77.

¹⁴ In the *Codex Vaticanus A (3738)* or *Ríos*, in *Antigüedades de México*, ed. and comments by J. Corona Núñez, 4 vols. (Mexico City: Secretaria de Hacienda, 1964–67), 3:7–313, the first human couple is shown wrapped in a mantle, that is to say, having sex. The spark from Omeycan that impregnates the woman is symbolized by a flint knife. In the *Ritual of the Bacabs*, trans. and ed. Ralph L. Roys (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), pp. 61–62, flint is called "genitals" and "1 Ahau," i.e., 1 Xochitl among the Aztecs, the name of Cinteotl-Venus, born from the first transgression in other myths.

openings of the human body,¹⁵ and, in this case, the body of the earth. Thus impregnated, the earth gives birth to the sixteen hundred children expelled from the celestial city. The myth is then about the illicit descent to earth of the first one of the sparks and the resulting illicit fecundation.

The theme of the primeval transgression that brings exile on earth, in darkness, and death, is one of the most fundamental in Mesoamerican mythology. The sins may vary: a goddess plucking the flower of a forbidden tree (codices *Telleriano-Remensis*, *Ríos*, *Borgia*; Sahagún's *Primeros Memoriales*) or fruit (*Codex Telleriano-Remensis*, *Popol Vuh*), having intercourse (*Histoire du Méchique*; *Anales de Cuauhtitlan*; *Chilam Balam of Chumayel*), or playing ball (*Popol Vuh*), making fire (*Leyenda de los Soles*), tearing a monster into pieces (*Histoire du Méchique*), expelling an unusual flint-brother from heaven, and so forth; but fundamentally, the common element is that the culprits assert themselves as equal to their creators by creating (the to and fro movement of the fire sticks and of the ball in the ballgame are also acts of creation), procreating (plucking a flower or fruit symbolizes having sex), or taking one's life without asking permission to do so. They are proud, and pride, that is, failing to recognize the authority of superiors, fathers, elders, and rulers, is the main transgression creatures may commit.¹⁶ It is one of the main themes of Mesoamerican thought, the other being the opposite, the "first will be the last" theme: the valorous younger one, the newcomer, the warrior, the nomad who overtakes or vanquishes his abusive parents, elders or superiors, often characterized as autochthons (Nanahuatl overtaking Tecciztecatl, the Twins of the *Popol Vuh* defeating their elders and their great-uncles, Quetzalcoatl defeating his uncles, Huitzilopochtli and his brothers, the Mexica newcomers the autochthons of Central Mexico, etc.).¹⁷

It is in the myth recorded by Olmos and its variants that we have to seek the explanation for the events that follow, at Teotihuacan: the gods' presence on earth—for the gods who sprang forth from the flint knife are obviously the ones who had been expelled from heaven ("if they had

¹⁵ Ruiz de Alarcón, pp. 208–9, 218–19.

¹⁶ On the first transgression, see M. Graulich, "Myths of Paradise Lost in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico," *Current Anthropology* 24, no. 5 (1983): 575–88, *Myths of Ancient Mexico* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), pp. 49–59, 91–95, 99–109, 160, 192–201, 210–19; Alfredo López Austin, *Los mitos del tlacuache: Caminos de la mitología mesoamericana* (Mexico City: Alianza Editorial Mexicana, 1990), pp. 97–100, 475–78, and *Tamoanchan y Tlalocan* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1994), pp. 73–77, 93–101; Guilhem Olivier, *Moqueries et métamorphoses d'un dieu aztèque: Tezcatlipoca, le "Seigneur au miroir fumant"* (Paris: Mémoires de l'Institut d'Ethnologie, Musée de l'Homme, 1997).

¹⁷ M. Graulich, "Autóctonos y recién llegados en el pensamiento mesoamericano," in *Pensar América: Cosmovisión mesoamericana y andina*, ed. A. Garrido Aranda (Córdoba: Cajasur y Ayuntamiento de Montilla, 1997).

behaved properly they would still be with her”)—and their mortality. They are exiled on earth, where they henceforth live like (more) material mortals, for having committed a transgression. Nanahuatl’s buboes avow his guilt, while Tecciztecatl’s pride conceals it, but both are willing to expiate to regain paradise lost. The gods are banished on earth, in darkness, and are condemned to die: their only wish can be to try and recuperate their lost paradise and return to the heaven. Hence their sacrifice, their voluntary death, the accepted destruction of their material body that binds them here below. They die, go to the underworld, conquer death, and leave the land of the deceased in a more or less glorified form in accordance with their merit. They ascend to heaven, where Nanahuatl is enthroned by the creators, which proves that he managed to reestablish contact. Their sacrifice is exemplary. Warriors who follow their example and die voluntarily on the battlefield or the sacrificial stone (or who die symbolically through a victim they offer) shall also descend to Mictlan and emerge to accompany the sun in its glorious ascent. Other deserving humans will go to the paradise of Tlaloc. That is, humans will go to the two hereafters established by, and almost identical to, Nanahuatl and Tecciztecatl: the sun and the paradise of Tlaloc located on the moon which is equated with a cave.¹⁸

In the myth of the creation of the sun and the moon—but indeed about much more than that—after the self-immolation of Nanahuatl and

¹⁸ *Codex Vaticanus A* (3738), pl. 2, 11; Graulich, *Myths of Ancient Mexico*, p. 123. On the hereafter, see also M. Graulich, “Afterlife in Ancient Mexican Thought,” in *Circumpacifica: Festschrift für Thomas S. Barthel*, ed. B. Illius and M. Laubscher, 2 vols. (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1990), 2:165–87; Natalie Ragot, *Les au delàs aztèques: Approche des conceptions sur la mort et le devenir des morts (Mexique)*, (doctoral diss., École Pratique des Hautes Études, Section des sciences religieuses, Paris, 1999). Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, bk. 6, chap. 7, pp. 30–32, contains an interesting speech addressed by a soothsayer or “confessor” to a penitent, in which the sinner is described as one whom the gods send to death in the underworld but who, thanks to his rite of purification, is born again as a child or as the rising sun. The adventures of the twins in Xibalbá, in the *Popol Vuh*, are constructed on the same model. In a recent article (“Misterios de la vida y de la muerte,” *Arqueología mexicana* 7, no. 40 [1999]: 4–10, quote on 8–9), López Austin admits my interpretation of a relationship between moral conduct during lifetime and the destination after death, but he denies that we might consider Aztec religion to be a “religion of salvation,” comparable, for instance, to Christianity or Islam. But one should not forget, first, that there are many other religions of salvation, morally less exacting than Christianity or Islam; second, that the paradigmatic myth of Teotihuacan clearly implies the idea of expiation and purification to gain a glorious afterlife; third, that we have reliable testimonies according to which warriors died happily in the hope of going to the House of the Sun (Hernán Cortés, *Cartas de Relación* [Mexico City: Porrúa, 1963], p. 184; “Información de Velázquez,” in *Documentos Cortesianos I*, ed. José Luis Martínez [Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1990], p. 207); fourth, that the Catholic missionaries were the first ones to emphasize the striking similarities between Aztec religion and Christianity, including the salvation aspect and, finally, that if I drew a parallel with Christianity, I also insisted on the differences and suggested that either the religion of the Aztecs was only in the process of being structured into a religion of salvation, or that it had partially lost this original meaning: M. Graulich, “L’arbre interdit du paradis aztèque,” *Revue de l’Histoire des Religions* 207, no. 1 (1990): 30–64.

Tecciztecatl, the gods ask themselves if they will have to live with the humans, which means on earth. It would seem that they expected to benefit from the sacrifice of the two heroes, in the same manner as, in ritual, sacrificers (i.e., those who offer the victim) do benefit from the death of their victims by dying symbolically through them. This interpretation is suggested by Ruiz de Alarcón's version of the myth, in which the other gods do penance during the immolation and expect to metamorphose according to their merit.¹⁹

The gods' expectation is in vain: all of them must die to feed the sun. It has already been said that most versions omit this episode of the killing of the gods. The very idea that the sun needs their blood and hearts to go on its way is rather odd: it did not need them to ascend to the zenith, and the moon and stars appear to be able to travel all the time without such fuel. Moreover, the efficiency and, therefore, the necessity of feeding the sun in this way is frankly negated in one of the two major sources (both in nahuatl) that mention it. According to Sahagún's informants (who possibly were not from Mexico-Tenochtitlan), in spite of the general immolation of the gods, the sun did not move until Ehecatl's breath (the breath of life, for Ehecatl is also the deity who endows recently born children with this breath) animated it.

The idea that the sun had to be constantly nourished in this peculiar way was probably urged by the Mexicas as a justification for their constant war waging. They only had to manipulate the myth somewhat to introduce it. I have shown elsewhere that many Aztec myths are fragments of a great cycle of which the adventures of the Twins of the *Popol Vuh* are a variant.²⁰ In this Maya-Quiche myth the twins die in Xibalbá, the underworld, by jumping into a fire, then are born again, conquer the lords of Xibalbá, and sacrifice them before they emerge as the sun and moon, with the spoils alluded to in the *Histoyre du Méchique*.²¹ The Mexicas transformed the defeat of the lords into the death of the gods to nourish the sun. Let us remember that in the *Leyenda*, the gods are also treated as enemies.

THE FIRST WAR TO NOURISH THE SUN AND EARTH

The gods had to die to expiate their sin and recover their lost paradise. But what about the humans? Why do they have to die? Are they also punished, and for what? There were probably two interpretations. The

¹⁹ Ruiz de Alarcón, pp. 150–51 and 221–23. "We give the name 'sacrificer' to the subject to whom the benefits of sacrifice thus accrue, or who undergoes its effects": Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function* (London: Cohen & West, 1964), p. 10.

²⁰ M. Graulich, *Myths of Paradise Lost, Myths of Ancient Mexico, and Quetzalcóatl y el espejismo de Tollan* (Antwerp: Instituut voor Amerikanistiek, 1988).

²¹ Graulich, "Popol Vuh" (n. 8 above); Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Apologética Histórica*, 2 vols. (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1967), 2:650.

first one may have been that, being born material and on earth, they were mortal by definition. But there are also texts that clearly present them as culprits. "Our tribute is death; awarded us in common *as merited*. And on earth there prevaieth the coming to pay the tribute of death," the priest of Tezcatlipoca prayed. The humans have to "pay their debt"—a recurrent expression to designate sacrifice—to the gods.²² The myth of the first sacred war and of the slaughter of 400 Mimixcoas ("Cloud Snakes") illustrates very well the guilt of the humans. But before we examine it some words are needed about the part played by animals in the sacrificial mythology.

According to the Quichés, the first living creatures were the animals, but because they were not able to talk, to pronounce the names of their creators and to praise them, they were condemned to be hunted and eaten.²³ In the Olmos version of the myth of Teotihuacan, the quails, grasshoppers, butterflies, and serpents were condemned to be sacrificed because they did not know on which side the sun would rise: in other words, not knowing where to look, they could not praise it.

The myth of the 400 Mimixcoas (plural of Mixcoatl) is told in the *Leyenda* immediately after the birth of the sun at Teotihuacan. In the year 1, Flint, the goddess of water gave birth to 400 Mimixcoas and later to five younger children, Mixcoatl, Cuauhtli icohuah, Tlotepetl, Apantecuhtli, and the girl Cuetlachihuah. The latter five were suckled by the earth goddess Mecitli and are therefore Mecitins or Mexicas. The sun ("Tonatiuh") gave shields and precious darts to the 400 Mimixcoas, commanding them to feed and serve him and their mother Tlaltecuhli (Lady of the Earth). However, the 400 did not obey; they only shot birds, and when they caught a jaguar, instead of offering it to the sun, they dressed up with feathers, slept with women, and got disgustingly drunk. Tonatiuh then summoned the five last-born, armed them with ordinary thorn-tipped darts and with shields, and ordered them to kill the 400 "who do not say 'mother ! father !'" The five poor younger brothers and sister hid themselves, and when the 400 arrived they came out of their hidings and the four brothers attacked. Almost all of the 400 were destroyed.²⁴

The importance of this myth is evidenced by the fact that the prisoners of war to be sacrificed were dressed in the attire of the 400 Mimixcoas

²² Sahagún, *Florentine Codex* (n. 3 above), bk. 1, chap. 1, p. 4. See also Konrad Th. Preuss, "Die Sünde in der Mexikanischen religion," *Globus* 83 (1903): 253–57, 268–73, 256. Concerning the "debt payment," *nextlahualli* (*Florentine Codex*, bk. 2, App., p. 199), the same word designates human sacrifices generally, as well as rituals without killing or even without bloodshed, like offerings of copal and paper.

²³ Graulich, "Popol Vuh," pp. 78–79.

²⁴ *Leyenda de los Soles* (n. 11 above), fol. 79.

whom they represented. The very myth was reenacted every year in the “gladiatorial sacrifice” during the twenty-day month of Tlacaxipehualiztli, whose rituals celebrated the first rising of the sun, the beginning of sacred war, and the harvesting of food for the sun and earth, gods and humans.²⁵ It clearly shows that at the beginning, the offerings expected by the sun and earth were animals, the first earthly creatures to have been condemned to (sacrificial) death because they did not recognize the superiority of their creators, or at least did not express it. But among the first humans, the 400 Mimixcoas also failed to do their duty: they did not offer their prey to the sun and earth, and therefore were condemned to become prey themselves. The myth proposes a passage from animal to human sacrifice. It tells about the beginning of the holy war, but a war that is actually a big hunting party.

It is remarkable that in this myth not all the humans are condemned, but only a category described as elders, rich, lazy, impious, and drunkards, while their opponents are poor but valiant younger ones, newcomers whose thorn-tipped darts evoke the weapons of Chichimec nomads. Here we meet again the basic overturning theme of the victorious newcomers stressed above, but with a clear political undertone: the guiltless victors are the innocent Mexicas, while the culpable vanquished are their enemies the Mexicas used to immolate.

As stated before, the *Leyenda* is with the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas* one of the late Mexica compositions ordered by Motecuhzoma II, who wanted to rewrite the Aztec cosmogony. Both works share a common structure and present comparable versions of the “legend of the Suns (eras of the past),” but they nevertheless proceed from different schools of thought. Their versions of the creation of humans and the myth of Teotihuacan are rather different. The *Historia*’s mythical part includes a short theogony with the Mexica tutelar deity, Huitzilopochtli, mentioned among the first four children of the supreme creators. Any hint of the idea of transgression or culpability is carefully wiped out. Before autosacrifice or sacrifice began, there already existed war in order to nourish the sun. And, the last peculiarity, the hearts and blood of victims are to feed only the sun, not the earth. In the *Leyenda* on the contrary, it is clearly father sun and mother earth that are to receive these offerings and there are transgressions from the very start of the present era, and notably that of the 400 Mimixcoas. And war is preceded first

²⁵ M. Graulich, “Tlacaxipehualiztli ou la fête aztèque de la moisson et de la guerre,” *Revista Española de Antropología Americana* 12 (1982): 215–54, “Chasse et sacrifice humain chez les Aztèques,” *Académie Royale des Sciences d’Outre-Mer, Bulletin des Séances* 43, no. 4 (1997): 433–46, *Rituales aztecas: Las fiestas de las veintenas* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional Indigenista, 1999).

by autosacrifice, then by sacrifice of the gods, the same as in the other traditions.

MIXCOATEPEC AND COATEPEC

Two other well-known and important texts, the myths of Quetzalcoatl's victory at Mixcoatepec and of Huitzilopochtli's triumph at Coatepec, present prototypical victims of human sacrifice as transgressors.

It is again the *Leyenda* that tells the story of Quetzalcoatl's victory on the Mixcoatepetl, the Hill of Mixcoatl. According to this ancient myth with parallels in the *Popol Vuh*,²⁶ Quetzalcoatl was the son of Mixcoatl. His uncles, the 400 Mimixcoas, who hated Mixcoatl, killed and buried him. Quetzalcoatl looked for his father and found his bones and buried them in the Hill of Mixcoatl (Mixcoatepetl). Informed of this, the murderers, Apanecatl, Zolton, and Cuilton, told Quetzalcoatl that they would be angry if he inaugurated (drilled with the fire sticks) his temple (on the hill) by sacrificing a rabbit or a serpent, because the required sacrifices were an eagle, a jaguar, and a kind of wolf. Quetzalcoatl told the three animals that they would not die, but that, on the contrary, they would eat the three uncles to inaugurate the temple. He went to the temple through an underground gallery and lit the inaugural fire. His uncles were furious because they wanted to make this fire themselves. They stormed the hill but Quetzalcoatl killed and sacrificed them.²⁷

Not only are the Mimixcoas guilty for having assassinated their brother, but we also find again a passage from animal to human sacrifice. The uncles fancy that Quetzalcoatl will offer small animals while they would sacrifice bigger game, but after all it is Quetzalcoatl who makes the most precious offering: his own uncles instead of animals.

The famous myth of Huitzilopochtli's birth at Coatepec, one of the few genuinely Mexica myths, is flatly copied from the Toltec Mixcoatepec story. Coatlicue (a name of the earth deity), the mother of the 400 Huitznahuas and their older sister, Coyolxauhqui, lives on the Snake Hill, Coatepec, near Tollan, sweeping and doing penance. One day she sweeps a ball of feathers and puts it in her skirt, which leaves her pregnant. Her outraged children decide to kill her. The terrified Coatlicue is heartened by a voice coming from her womb that tells her not to fear. Coyolxauhqui and her brothers prepare for war and march in battle order to the Coatepec. When they reach the terrace at the top, Huitzilopochtli

²⁶ Mixcoatl corresponds to Hun Hunahpu, who was killed by the Lords of Xibalbá, and his (in some versions posthumous) son Quetzalcoatl corresponds to the posthumous sons of Hun Hunahpú, the twins, Xbalamqué and Hunahpú. Like Quetzalcoatl, the twins sought for the bones of their father, descended to the underworld (the Mixcoatepec in the *Leyenda de los Soles*), and avenged their father by killing the murderers in sacrifice.

²⁷ *Leyenda de los Soles*, fol. 81.

is born wholly armed. With his “fire serpent” he pierces Coyolxauhqui and beheads her. Then the newcomer attacks the four hundred and destroys them.²⁸

The sources inform us that this myth was reactualized every year during the great festival of Panquetzaliztli. Revealing enough of the Toltec origin of the ritual, the prisoners who performed the play of the Huitznahuas were still dressed like Mimixcoas. The transgression of the would-be killers who want to kill their mother and so impede the birth of their younger brother, but who are killed themselves, also recalls somewhat the sin in the heavenly city, where the gods ejected their unexpected and unusual flint brother but found themselves expelled on earth and condemned to die.

THE VICTIMS AS CULPRITS

Ritual practice also proves that sacrificial death was expiation.²⁹ According to Clavijero, Motecuhzoma said to Cortés that “he didn’t see any reason not to immolate to the gods men who for their personal misdemeanors or as prisoners of war were already condemned to death.”³⁰ I do not know where Clavijero acquired this information, but we shall see that there is ample evidence to substantiate his claims.

Concerning the prisoners of war, sometimes called “penitents,” they impersonated Mimixcoas, who drank pulque and slept with women instead of doing their duty. Therefore, they were given pulque, and sometimes women, before their immolation.³¹ A ritual performed during the month of Etzalcualiztli illustrates very well the spirit of the immolation of warriors. Before the festival, the priests had to fast and do penance.

²⁸ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, bk. 3, chap. 1, pp. 1–5; Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, ed. A. M. Garibay, 4 vols. (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1956), 1:271–73. It must be pointed out that Sahagún, in his book, tells the myth about the origin of the gods immediately after referring to the sun’s birth in Teotihuacan. Aside from that, there is no context, but it is clear that it was an episode during the migrations.

²⁹ Seler (n. 2 above), 3: 286–87, questions some of Preuss’s translations and the idea that sacrificial death is castigation. Duverger (n. 1 above), p. 147, thinks that human sacrifice is never a penalty and “never must look like a repressive and barbarian act.” For W. Krickeberg (*Las antiguas culturas mexicanas* [Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1964], p. 158) also, human sacrifice is not a punishment but an honorable duty.

³⁰ Francisco Javier Clavijero, *Historia antigua de México*, ed. M. Cuevas (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1964), p. 338. But this passage may be an eighteenth-century construction, like the phrase that follows, also attributed to Motecuhzoma: “No contradigo la bondad del Dios que adoráis, pero si él es bueno para España, los nuestros lo son para México.”

³¹ Cristóbal del Castillo, *Historia de la venida de los mexicanos y ostrom pueblos e Historia de la conquista*, trans. F. Navarrette Linares (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1991), pp. 128–29; Durán (n. 12 above), 1:98, 2:160. Sahagún, *Florentine Codex* (n. 3 above), bk. 2, chap. 21, p. 52. On penitents, see Fernando Alvarado Tezozomoc, *Crónica mexicana precedida del Códice Ramírez*, ed. M. Orozco y Berra (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1975).

Any neglect, like making a stain while eating, was severely castigated. They spied on one another and denounced the transgressors, who became the “captives” of the denouncers or “captors”—the terms used are those of warfare. If the culprits were unable to pay the fine to their captors, they were caught by the hair, as on the battlefield, and cast into the lagoon, beaten, submerged in the water until they suffocated and were “like death.”³² In other words, they were symbolically sacrificed like prisoners of war.

For a warrior, death on the battlefield or on the sacrificial stone was at the same time glorious and unfortunate, or even infamous. According to the divinatory almanac, dying in battle or in sacrifice was considered a “bad end,” and was put on the same level as execution for adultery or robbery. To hear a wild animal crying or howling was a bad omen that announced death in war or some other “misery” or “disaster,” like being sold as a slave or a prisoner of war or being condemned. Winning at the ballgame announced much adultery or death on the battlefield or by an outraged husband. Nahuatl proverbs also connote negatively the sacrificial death of a warrior. The saying “I have given you your banner, your strips of paper [part of the attire of the Mimixcoa victims],” is explained as follows: “This is said when someone has reached the point of despair.” A metaphor collected by Olmos says “I give you chalk and feather down, I give you your banner and *teteuitl* paper [also attire of the Mimixcoas], I place you before the mat, the seat, I drive you into the earth, I give you the spiny water, the water of pain,” which means, “now I cover your misdemeanor, but if you do not mend your ways, next time you will pay it all.”³³

The other great category of victims were the slaves. The very condition of being a slave was regarded as one of the worst disasters one could suffer, a stain from which sacrificial victims had to be purified, and a punishment.³⁴ For them also, sacrifice was a disgrace and an expiation. Only the unmanageable ones who had been sold two or three times, or those who had sold themselves to pay gambling debts and could not

³² Sahagún, *Florentine Codex* (n. 3 above), bk. 6, chap. 25, pp. 83–86.

³³ *Ibid.*, bk. 4, chap. 27, pp. 93–94; bk. 5, chap. 1, p. 151. Tezozomoc, chap. 2, p. 228; Thelma D. Sullivan, “Nahuatl Proverbs, Conundrums and Metaphors Collected by Sahagún,” *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl* 4 (1963): 93–178; K. Th. Preuss, “Die Feuergötter als Ausgangspunkt zum Verständnis der mexikanischen Religion in ihrem Zusammenhange,” *Mitteilungen der Wiener Anthropologischen Gesellschaft* 33 (1903): 129–233, 190–91; Preuss, “Die Sünde” (n. 22 above), p. 257.

³⁴ Durán, 1:64, 181–82, 185; Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, 4:91; A. J. P. Anderson, “The Institution of Slave-Bathing,” *Indiana* 7 (1982): 81–91. In Fray Andrés de Olmos, *Grammaire de la langue nahuatl ou mexicaine*, ed. by R. Siméon (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1875), p. 215, a slave was called “*teyo, quauhyo*,” “the one with the stone, the one with the stick,” that is, the castigated one. See Preuss, *Die Sünde*, pp. 256–57, and *Die Feuergötter*. Also Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, bk. 5, pp. 35, 93–95; bk. 7, pp. 23–24, quoted in Anderson.

buy themselves back could be immolated.³⁵ The 300 beautiful Tlaxcaltec female slaves allegedly offered to Cortés and his men as a present to eat were women who had been condemned to be sacrificed for violations of the law.³⁶

A third and much more limited category of victims comprises criminals and wrongdoers sentenced to death. Certain sentences were directly related to war and sacrifice. Noble warriors who had been caught on the battlefield but managed to escape were sacrificed in their home towns, as were guards who let prisoners escape, commoners who refused to attend immolations, servants who let the domestic fire go out during the New Fire ceremony, warriors of the ritual “flowery war” found in the land of their enemies, ambassadors considered traitors, and so forth.³⁷ Other misbehaviors that had to do with religion, such as sorcery, false predictions, robbery of temple objects, rape of virgins and adulteries are also mentioned in the sources.³⁸ Finally, ordinary criminals could also be immolated according to information from different cities.³⁹

Sacrifice was castigation, but also expiation, and it opened the way to a better hereafter. This explains, first, why it was readily accepted by many warriors—we have Spanish testimonies on victims they liberated in Mexico in 1520 and who rejoiced at being immolated—and, second,

³⁵ Victor M. Castillo, *Estructura económica de la sociedad mexicana* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1972), p. 123; Motolinia (Fray Toribio de Benavente), *Memoriales e Historia de los Indios de la Nueva España*, Biblioteca de Autores Españoles (Madrid: Atlas, 1970), p. 174; Durán, 1:125, 1:183–84, 200, 210; Fray Diego Durán even mentions sacrifice as the fourth mode of execution for trespassers, especially slaves. Slaves paid as tribute—i.e., as a penalty—were also sacrificed: J. L. de Rojas, ed., *Información de 1554: Sobre los tributos que los indios pagaban a Moctezuma* (Mexico City: CIESAS, 1997); Durán, 1:82; 2:321.

³⁶ Muñoz Camargo (n. 11 above), p. 237.

³⁷ Mendieta (n. 11 above), bk. 2, chap. 27, 1:144; Durán, 1:59; Tezozomoc, p. 321; Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, *Obras históricas*, ed. E. O’Gorman, 2 vols. (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1975–77), 2:111–13; Juan Bautista Pomar, “Relación de la ciudad y provincia de Tezcoco,” in *Relaciones geográficas del siglo XVI: México, tomo tercero*, ed. R. Acuña (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1986), p. 89; Francisco López de Gómara, *Historia general de las Indias*, 2 vols. (Barcelona: Iberia, 1965–66), p. 95; Cortés (n. 18 above), p. 133; Motolinia, p. 41.

³⁸ “Relación de la genealogía y linaje de los Señores que han señoreado esta tierra de la Nueva España . . .,” in Icazbalceta, ed. (n. 11 above), p. 283; Torquemada (n. 13 above), 2:386, 2:391; Francisco Cervantes de Salazar, *Crónica de la Nueva España*, 2 vols., Biblioteca de Autores Españoles (Madrid: Atlas, 1971), 1:56; R. Castañeda Paganini, *La cultura tolteca-pipil de Guatemala* (Guatemala City: Editorial del Ministerio de Educación Pública “José de Piñida Ibarra,” 1959), p. 33, quoting García Palacios’s 1574 letter to Philip II; Codex Telleriano-Remensis, in Corona Núñez, ed. (n. 13 above), 1:112, 201, 212–13, 216–17.

³⁹ “Relación de Metztitlan,” in *Relaciones geográficas del siglo XVI: México, tomo segundo*, ed. R. Acuña (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1986), p. 66; “Relación de Teccitlán” and “Relación de Ocopetlayuca,” both in Francisco del Paso y Troncoso, ed., *Papeles de la Nueva España*, 7 vols. (Madrid: Tip. Sucesores de Rivadeneyra, 1905–15), 6:257, 229 (also in *Relaciones geográficas*, p. 242); Ixtlilxochitl, p. 39.

why sometimes people volunteered to be offered. The case of prostitutes who did so in honor of the goddess of love Xochiquetzal, during her festival in Quecholli, and of musicians to have the honor to play the drum during festivals, is also documented. On the other hand, in the codices there are several representations of humans or gods killing themselves in sacrifice.⁴⁰

SACRIFIERS

The particular relationship established between the sacrificer and the victim constitutes another argument that confirms that sacrifice is above all a means of gaining a worthy afterlife through expiation. The sacrificer identifies with the victim, in order to die symbolically through the victim. The end was obviously not only to feed the god, or simply to gain merit for this or the other world, since for that, the offered victim could suffice. The only convincing explanation is that what the sacrificer wanted was to participate through the victim's death, to die through him, to offer himself, that is, to do as the gods in Teotihuacan who destroyed their material bodies to expiate and return to heaven. And, effectively, the prisoner of war killed on the sacrificial stone joined the House of Nahuatl-Sun, and so did, or would do, the sacrificer identified with him.

Evidence for this identification is not abundant but what exists is quite meaningful. When a warrior caught an enemy on the battlefield, he said "he is like my beloved son" (*ca iuhquj nopiltzin*) and the captive replied: "he is my beloved father" (*ca notatzin*). A son was regarded as the *ixiptla*, the image, the representation, of his father.⁴¹ The same word is used to qualify the victims or impersonators of the gods. The identification of captor with captive is confirmed by the fact that the former could not eat the latter: "would I eat my own self?" (*cuix çan no ninocua?*)⁴² At cer-

⁴⁰ Martínez, ed. (n. 18 above), 1:207: the victims "told him [Pedro de Alvarado] that they were kept to be sacrificed soon, and that they rejoiced for that, because they would go to their gods"; "Thomas Lopez Medel, Relación, 1612," in *Landa's Relación de las cosas de Yucatán*, trans. and notes by A. M. Tozzer, Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, vol. 18 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University, 1941), p. 222; Torquemada, 2:299; "Costumbres, fiestas, enterramientos y diversas formas de proceder de los Indios de Nueva España," ed. F. Gómez de Orozco, *Tlalocan* 2, no. 1 (1945): 37–63, 59. For reasons unclear, in Sahagún, *Florentine Codex* (n. 3 above), bk. 10, chap. 15, p. 55, the prostitute is compared to "a sacrificial victim, a bathed slave [tlacamicqui, suchimicqui, tlaaltilli, teumicqui]. . . . She lives like a bathed slave, acts like a sacrificial victim; she goes about with her head high—rude, drunk, shameless—eating mushrooms." For examples of suicide in codices, see the *Codex Borgia*, pp. 3, 4, 7, 18, 23, and possibly p. 46; Edward Seler, *Comentarios al Códice Borgia*, 2 vols. and facsimile (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1963).

⁴¹ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, bk. 6, pp. 17, 189. The first prisoner taken by a ruler was called "his son" and revered as much as the ruler himself, being saluted first, etc.: Motolinia, p. 161. People in danger of death from illness, war, perils of travel, etc., took a vow to sacrifice a slave or a son or daughter if they survived: their *ixiptla* died in their place: Las Casas (n. 21 above), 2:226.

tain moments, the captor dressed like his offering⁴³ or was called “sun, chalk and feather down” (*tonatiuh tiçatl ihuitl*) because, like his substitute, he was a victim (covered with chalk and feather down) and would join the sun.⁴⁴ More generally, when after a Mexica victory prisoners of war entered Mexico Tenachtitlan, they were told that they were at home; they were presented to the rulers and the gods; they were clothed, nourished, and sometimes even received women, and, in certain cases, could even live freely in the city for years. The point was that they had to be integrated as much as possible into the city, in order for them to be assimilable to the Mexicas who would die through them.⁴⁵

During the “gladiatorial” sacrifice the sacrificer danced and watched his captive, who had to fight before being put to death.⁴⁶ In another context it is said that he wanted “to see his god face to face,” an expression that in many religions expresses death, and we know of cases in which the sacrificer effectively was allowed to ascend to the top of the pyramid—the heaven, abode of the deity [’s image]—where the sacrifice took place and where he could effectively see “his god [’s image] face to face.”⁴⁷

A myth and a pseudohistorical ritual recorded in the *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas* both portray the victim as a substitute for the sacrificer. In the *Historia* version of the myth of Teotihuacan, the sun is the son of Quetzalcoatl (usually identifiable with Nanahuatl) and the moon the son of Tlaloc (remember that the moon is the Tlalocan, Tlaloc’s

⁴² Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, bk. 2, chap. 21, p. 54.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, bk. 2, p. 45; bk. 9, pp. 63–64.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, bk. 2, p. 48. A much less convincing (but probably popular) interpretation of covering the captor with feather down accompanies the text: “The captor’s being pasted with feathers was done because he had not died there in war or else [because] he would yet go to die, would go to pay the debt. Hence his blood relatives greeted him with tears; they encouraged him.”

⁴⁵ Graulich, *Montezuma* (n. 9 above), pp. 85–89.

⁴⁶ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, bk. 2, p. 52.

⁴⁷ Face to face: see, e.g., Leviticus 18:6. Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, bk. 9, pp. 55, 67; bk. 2, p. 49: the dead warrior goes in front of the face of the sun, Sahagún, *Historia* (n. 28 above), p. 48. According to a modern Totonac myth collected by Ichon (Alain Ichon, *La Religion des Totonques de la Sierra* [Paris: Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1969], pp. 45, 53), the gods contemplated providing the humans with a kind of visor that would prevent them seeing the heavens and therefore from dying, unless they wanted to die by lifting their heads and seeing the gods face to face; but the gods changed their minds when the first creature committed a transgression. While they climbed the stairs, the sacrificers did something described as “*moquaiiauitiuh*,” translated by Anderson and Dibble as “they went putting breath to their heads,” drawing their inspiration from Sahagún’s *Historia*, bk. 9, chap. 14, p. 55: “y subiendo resollaban las manos y ponian el resuello en las cabezas con las manos,” but it is difficult to find *resollar*: *ihiyotia* (*nin*) in *iauitiuh*. Another translation for this difficult verb is Schultze Jena’s (Leonhard Schultze Jena, *Gliederung des Alt-Aztekischen Volks in Familie, Stand und Beruf*, Quellenwerke zur alten Geschichte Amerikas aufgezeichnet in den Sprachen der Eingeborenen V [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1952], p. 340), based on *iyaua.nin*, “ofrecerse alguno en sacrificio a dios; *nitla* : ofrecer algo desta manera, o incensar”—“he gave his head as an offering to Huitzilopochtli.” This is very interesting in our context but also debatable.

paradise). The fathers both throw their sons into the fire: they are the sacrificers and the sacrificers simultaneously, and we have seen that their sons are *their* *ixiptlas*, their images or representations. To participate in the death of their sons, Quetzalcoatl and Tlaloc inflicted upon themselves partial deaths by fasting and drawing blood from their ears and body before the immolation.

More telling still is the story of the Mexica-Tlatelolcas transgression during the wanderings of the Mexicas to their promised land. In the year 13 Reed, in Tamazcaltitlan, the Tlatelolcas murmur at being led to disaster by Huitzilopochtli. To punish them, their god tells them in dreams that those who mumbled sinned like people with two faces and two tongues and that to be pardoned they had to make a seed image of a head with two faces and two tongues, shoot it with arrows, look for it blindfolded, and eat it. The image evidently represents the sinners who have to sacrifice themselves symbolically by killing their image to expiate.⁴⁸

In Aztec ritual the sacrificer could be an individual (warrior, merchant, artisan), but also a group (corporation, ward, state) whose members contributed to buy the slave who would impersonate their tutelary deity. These members also “died” through their victims, but we may assume that they expiated less and earned less merit than the individual sacrificer.

The victim as substitute for the sacrificer is not uncommon in the history of religions.⁴⁹ The ancient substitution system still survives in Mexico, among the Huicholes, where the famous peyote hunt is assimilated with a deer hunt, the deer being the game *par excellence* and the animal equivalent of captured enemy. Peyote and deer are also assimilated with maize, as were captives in ancient Mexico, and with the Huicholes themselves: “they form a unity, they are our life, they are ourselves.”⁵⁰ The peyote cactus is shot with arrows, and the hunters treat it as if it really

⁴⁸ A comparable episode seems to be figured in the *Rollo Selden* (in Corona Núñez, ed. [n. 13 above], 2:111), a document depicting wanderings often closely related to the Mexica ones.

⁴⁹ On the frequent assimilation of sacrificer and victim (and addressee), see William Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites* (London: A. & C. Black, 1894); Comte Goblet d'Alviella, *Rites, croyances, institutions*, 3 vols. (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1911), p. 303, even mentions pre-Columbian America in this context; Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Phénoménologie de la religion* (Paris: Payot [1933] 1970), sec. 50, pp. 341–48; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1962), pp. 295–98; Madeleine Biardeau and Charles Malamoud, *Le sacrifice dans l'Inde ancienne*, Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études, Section des Sciences Religieuses 79 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1976).

⁵⁰ On the Huichol peyote hunt, see Barbara G. Myerhoff, *Peyote Hunt: The Sacred Journey of the Huichol Indians* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974); S. Nahmad, O. Klineberg, P. T. Furst, and B. Myerhoff, *El peyote y los huicholes* (Mexico City: SepSetentas, 1979); Carl Lumholtz, *El México desconocido*, 2 vols. (Mexico City: Editorial Nacional, 1904), 1:125–35; Peter T. Furst, ed., *La chair des dieux: L'usage rituel des psychédéliques* (Paris: Seuil, 1974); Peter T. Furst, *Los alucinógenos y la cultura* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1980). The peyote quest practiced by the ancient Chichimecs is described by Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, bk. 10, chap. 29. On hunting and sacrifice, see Graulich, *Chasse* (n. 25 above).

were a deer. It is “flayed” and eaten. The Indians, who die in or through the peyote cactus, then “see their lives,” and their shaman sees their gods face to face: they have ascended to heaven and recovered their lost paradise.

We have seen from the outset that the Aztec practice of human sacrifice was varied. In myth, not all the deaths of gods are expiatory, especially not the dema-type one of Tlalteotl, “Earth Deity,” a kind of saurian who haunted the primeval waters and whose body Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca tore into pieces to make from one part the earth, and from the other the sky. To console Tlalteotl, the angry gods (probably the supreme creators) made her body the source of all the fruits of the earth that humans need. Far from being expiation, her killing is a variant of the first transgression perpetrated by the gods.⁵¹ When Tlalteotl’s killing and the creation of the earth was reenacted in Ochpaniztli,⁵² it certainly was no expiatory death for the goddess, but it was for the slave representing her and, of course, for the sacrificers, in this case the midwives and healers who offered her. Ancient Mexican sacrifice consists of superimposed layers of meanings.

To conclude, expiation in view of a worthy afterlife is central to the theory and practice of Aztec human sacrifice. We have seen it at the core of the most important origin myth of sacrifice, misleadingly called the myth of the creation of sun and moon, where self-sacrifice was the only means for gods expelled on earth after a transgression to return to heaven. As for the terrestrial beings, first the animals were condemned for neglecting to venerate their creators, and, later, the humans were also condemned to sacrificial death for the same reason. An examination, first, of who the victims were and of how human sacrifice was regarded and, second, of the sacrificers and their particular relationship with the victims corroborates the central importance of expiation in Aztec sacrifice.

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⁵¹ *Histoire du Méchique* (n. 11 above), pp. 30–31. For an analysis of the myth in its context, see Graulich, *Myths of Ancient Mexico* (n. 16 above), pp. 49–62. The author of the *Histoire de Méchique* goes on to explain that Earth only bears fruit if nourished with hearts and watered with human blood. Her death obviously is not expiation, but the payment of blood is: the humans have to pay for repeating constantly the prototypical transgression when they tear the earth open to cultivate it. This looks like a typically late Aztec and Mexica development aimed at explaining that both Earth and Sun need hearts to do their duty. The myth is also interesting because it presents life (plants) as proceeding from death. But it should be observed that the birth of the useful plants is the result of a decision of the gods who want to console the victim, who had returned to life.

⁵² See n. 5 above.