

AUTOSACRIFICE IN ANCIENT MEXICO

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Autosacrifice as the ritual extracting of one's own blood was one of the most ancient and important cultural acts in ancient Mesoamerica.¹ It is documented at least from about 1200 B.C. onwards, first through the discovery of bloodletting instruments in private and public dwellings, later by depictions of bloodletting rituals and finally through texts, especially those concerning the Aztecs. It has been commented upon by almost every scholar dedicated to Mesoamerican religions but specific studies are scarce, the main ones being an article written by Zelia Nuttall² at the turn of the century and a more extensive contribution of Cecelia Klein's.³ The present article, mainly based on written sources on regions or cities belonging to the Aztec empire, presents the available data and possible interpretations of relevant myths, rituals and instruments and their symbolism.⁴ It is part of a more comprehensive study of Aztec human sacrifice.

¹ Blooddrawing in a ritual context could also be inflicted to someone, with (or without) his consent: see Pedro Carrasco, *Los Otomíes, Cultura e historia prehispánicas de los pueblos mesoamericanos de habla otomiana*, p. 206-2077; "Proceso de los indios de Tanacopan", in *Procesos de Indios idólatras y hechiceros*; Motolinía, *Memoriales e Historia de los Indios de la Nueva España*, p. 27: old priests had their tongues pierced by a "master". Durán, *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España y Islas de Tierra Firme*, 1, ch. 5, p. 57 priests incised the ears and penis ("a manera de circuncisión") of newborn children; Sahagún, *Primeros Memoriales*, p. 43.

² "A Penitential Rite of the Ancient Mexicans", *Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology*, Cambridge, Mass., 1904.

³ "The Ideology of Autosacrifice at the Templo Mayor", *The Aztec Templo Mayor*, A Symposium at Dumbarton Oaks, 8th and 9th October 1983, ed. by Elizabeth Hill Boone, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington D.C., 1987.

⁴ Sometimes data from other areas will also be referred to when relevant. As other students of Mesoamerican religions, I agree with Bartolomé de Las Casas; statement that "la religión de toda la Nueva España por más de ochocientas leguas en torno es toda cuasi una, dentro de las cuales se comprenden las provincias de Guatimala y de Honduras y de Nicaragua", *Apologética Historia Sumaria*, v. 2, p. 229. On autosacrifice, see also, for instance, Preuss, "Die Sünde in der Mexikanischen religion" in *Globus*, 1903b, 83, p. 253-2577, 268-273.

Autosacrifice in the sense adopted here has different potentially meaningful aspects: the bloodletting itself, the offering of blood, the pain inflicted, endured and offered, its effects on the performer and the recipient... As we shall see, the devotee underwent this ritual in order to humiliate, punish or purify himself, to obtain some compensation, to augment his endurance, his will, his power; to establish direct contact with the deity; he deprives himself in order to give, to nourish the gods, to oblige them and to return them their due.

Mythical origins

Bloodletting is closely related to human sacrifice which it is supposed to precede. Myth attributes the first autosacrifices to gods, in the very beginning, before the world, death and humans existed. According to a Mixtec foundation myth of autosacrifice, at the beginning the supreme couple creates wonderful palaces on earth for their own habitation, then they had two sons, Wind of Nine Serpents and Wind of Nine Caves, who honored their parents by offering them incense of powdered tobacco.⁵ After this first offering, the two sons created a garden for their own pleasure and a beautiful meadow full of things necessary for their “offerings and sacrifices”:

Hacian asi mismo oracion, votos, i promesas à sus Padres, i pedianles, que por virtud de aquel Veleño, que les ofrecian, i los demàs sacrificios que les hacian, que tuviesen por bien de hacer el Cielo, i que huviese claridad en el Mundo: que se fundase la Tierra, ò por mejor decir, apareciese, i las Aguas se congregasen, pues no havia otra cosa para su descanso, sino aquel pequeño Vergèl. Y para mas obligarles à que hiciesen esto que pedian, se punçaban las orejas con vn hisopo de vna rama de vn Sauce, como cosa Santa, i bendita. En lo qual se ocupaban, aguardando el tiempo que deseaban, para mas contento suio, mostrando siempre sujecion à los Dioses sus Padres, i atribuyendolos mas poder, i deidad, que ellos tenian entre si.

Unfortunately Fray Gregorio García who recounts this myth omits a series of episodes “to avoid grieving readers with so many fables and stupidities” and he concludes by stating that a general flood drowned many gods. We may nevertheless observe that creatures owe their creators respect and submission, that they have to acknowledge their own inferiority and humble themselves by offer-

⁵ García, *Origen de los Indios de el Nuevo Mundo e Indias Occidentales*, p. 327-29.

ings and autosacrifice⁶ and that only through these may they expect to obtain what they want. After burning incense they create their garden and only after their bloodletting can they expect their parents to get the universe into position. The myths also presents an evolution from “immaterial” offerings —incense— to products of the meadow —flowers and plants, possibly also animals, as confirmed by other versions that we shall examine later, and finally blood. It is noteworthy that nothing in these widespread and ancient myths suggests that the recipients of autosacrifice have to be fed by blood. Apparently the offering by the creatures of their own blood rather than flowers or animals only indicates their recognition that they owe their life to their creators and are ready to give it back.

I have shown elsewhere that the Mixtec myth is but one of many versions of a pan-Mesoamerican myth of paradise lost because of a transgression committed by the first creatures.⁷ The nature of the transgression is also suggested here: neglecting the creators or equaling oneself to them. This is explicit in a Southern Guatemalan myth collected by Bartolomé de las Casas.⁸ The original creator couple, Itzamná and Ixchel, had thirteen children of which the older ones sought to create humans without their parents’ permission (“they became proud”) but could produce only common household vessels and were thrown into hell. But the younger ones, Hunchuen and Hunahau, asked for permission, humbled themselves and therefore were able to create the heavens and planets, the four elements (fire, air, water and earth) and the first human couple. Admittedly Las Casas does not mention autosacrifice but the humbling probably stands for it. Be that as it may, if the concept of reciprocity (*do ut des*) is one of the bases of bloodoffering, it is certainly not egalitarian, as has been claimed.⁹

Another paradise in which bloodletting is explicitly stressed is the mythical Tollan at the end of the Toltec period, the fourth era or Sun.

⁶ Humiliate: (*icnomati*; *icnotl*, “orphan, someone or something poor, humble, worthy of compassion and aid”, Karttunen, *An Analytical Dictionary of Nahuatl* p. 94.

⁷ Graulich, “The Metaphor of the Day in Ancient Mexican Myth and Ritual”, *Current Anthropology*, 1981, 22, 1, p. 45-60; “Myths of Paradise Lost in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico”, *Current Anthropology*, 1983, 24, 5, p. 575-588; and, *Myths of Ancient Mexico*. Until recently these ideas of a paradise lost by transgression used to be dismissed as influenced by Catholicism but today their obvious authenticity is more and more acknowledged. See for instance López Austin, *Los mitos del tlacuache. Caminos de la mitología mesoamericana*; Carrasco, *Uttered from the heart: guilty rhetoric among the Aztecs. History of Religions*; Olivier, *Moqueries et métamorphoses d'un dieu aztèque. Tezcallipoca, le “Seigneur au miroir fumant”*. Paris, Mémoires de l'Institut d'Ethnologie XXXIII, Musée de l'Homme, 1997, and Saurin, *Teocuitall. Chants sacrés des anciens Mexicains*. 1

⁸ *Op. cit.*, III, ch. 235, v. 2, p. 505-506.

⁹ Klein, *op. cit.*, p. 294.

According to the sources, Tollan was a land of everlasting abundance. The Toltecs were very skilled, invented all the arts and crafts, were rich, righteous, fleet... and their ruler, Quetzalcoatl, is presented as the inventor of autosacrifice and the prototype of the kings and priests who have to earn merit in order for their people to thrive. "And this Quetzalcoatl also did penance. He bled the calf of his leg to stain thorns with blood. And he bathed at midnight." His prayers were addressed to the sole supreme couple. But one day, Quetzalcoatl committed a transgression. Deceived by his hostile brother Tezcatlipoca, he got drunk and spent the night with his sister, forgetting his penances. Then everything collapsed. Vice, illness, plagues, war, death and human sacrifices entered Tollan and the Toltecs were expelled from their splendid city. It was the end of paradise and of an era.¹⁰

In these myths autosacrifice is motivated not only by the creatures' recognition of their creation—as we have seen, for that, burning powdered tobacco was sufficient—but above all by the desire to obtain something important: creation or permission to create, or, in the myth of Tollan, the continued prosperity of the paradisiacal city-state. The essential myths of the recreation of humans and of sun and earth at the beginning of the present era or Sun¹¹ confirm this view.

We have three versions of Quetzalcoatl's or his twin Xolotl's voyage to the underworld. According to Mendieta's, the most complete, the gods exiled on earth after a transgression begged their mother for permission to create humans who would serve them.¹² The supreme goddess replied that they did not deserve it and instructed them to descend and ask the lords of the underworld, Mictlantecuhtli, to hand over a bone and some ashes of the deceased of the former era that could be used as seed to recreate humans. Xolotl descended and managed to return with the bone and the ashes which were put in a vessel so that the gods and goddesses could bleed themselves on it. The fourth day a boy appeared and the eighth day a girl. In another version, the "Leyenda de los Soles", written in Nahuatl, Quetzalcoatl brings male and female bones back and they are ground like maize seeds by a goddess.¹³ Then "Quetzalcoatl bled his penis on them" and

¹⁰ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex, General History of the Things of New Spain*, v. 3, p. 13-36; v. 10, p.165-170.

¹¹ According to versions, there were 3 or 4 Suns of the past, the present one being the 4th, or, for the Aztecs, the 5th. Each Sun ended by a cataclysm. The "history" of Quetzalcoatl of Tollan is actually the myth of the 4th Sun. On the Suns, see Graulich, *Myths of Ancient Mexico*, p. 65-95.

¹² *Historia eclesiástica Indiana*, II, ch.1-2, p. 83-85.

¹³ *History and Mythology of the Aztecs, The Codex Chimalpopoca*, p.76 145.

other gods also drew blood. The third version states that the gods let blood from their tongues.¹⁴

Although closely related, the three versions represent slightly different shades of meaning which enrich the notion of autosacrifice. None of them mentions the supreme creators as the recipients of the sacrifice: probably they are implied—bloodletting is another way of getting permission to create—but in two cases there is a more direct addressee: the vessel with the bones and the ashes. One gets the impression that in these two cases the autosacrifice has also a value in itself, that it is the blood shed on the remains which fertilizes or vivifies them, even if this is made possible only through the supreme creators benevolence. The fecundation aspect is obvious in the “Leyenda” version, where Quetzalcoatl bleeds his penis, and even more so in the legend on the origin of the lords of Cuiclahuac, whose ancestors were born from the blood Mixcoatl (father also of Quetzalcoatl) extracted from his penis.¹⁵ The third version is more neutral since it establishes no direct link between the blood and the remains of the dead. Here autosacrifice seems to remain a mere *captatio benevolentiae*.

The myth popularly known among the Aztecs as that of the creation of sun and moon at Teotihuacan also presents most interesting peculiarities about autosacrifice. In fact it is, in the first place, a myth of death and resurrection. The gods are banished on earth for their transgression;¹⁶ the only possibility of regaining contact with their creators and their lost paradise is to vanquish death by sacrificing themselves, by destroying voluntarily their material body and to be born again in a more celestial form, inaugurating thereby a new era or Sun.

Two deities are willing to try and conquer death: poor, humble and sick—that is, sinner—¹⁷ Nanahuatl (“swollen glands”, an aspect

¹⁴ *Historyre du Méchique*, p. 28-29.

¹⁵ “Anales de Cuauhtitlán”, in *History and Mythology of the Aztecs, The Codex Chimalpopoca*, v. 1 p.62, v. 2, p. 126. In the prehispanic *Codex Borgia*, p. 53, Quetzalcoatl and Macuilxochitl puncture their penises and the blood irrigates the earth goddess whose body gives rise to an huge maize tree with enormous ears.

¹⁶ Mendieta, *op. cit.*, II, ch.1, p. 83-86.

¹⁷ There is no reason to avoid using the words “sin” and “sinner” since their general definition is very broad and in the Judeo-Christian sense even includes the mere transgression of a prohibition, without knowledge of good and evil. We know furthermore that the first missionaries were struck by the numerous similarities between Mexican and Christian myth and ritual. In ancient Mesoamerica, the major sins were pride and, more commonly, prohibited sex. Everything related with sex was called “the earthly thing” (*tlalticpacayotl*). On these subjects, see Preuss, “Die Sünde in der Mexikanischen religion” in *Globus*, 1903, 83, p. 268-273; Pettazoni *La confession des péchés. I.1: Primitifs-Amérique ancienne*, Graulich, “La fleur défendue, Interdits sexuels en Mésoamérique”, *Religion et tabou sexuel*, ed. by Jacques Marx, Brussels: Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1991, p. 105-116.

of Quetzalcoatl), and rich and arrogant Tecciztecatl (“He of the Conch Shell”). A brazier is lit and the two gods do penance in order to obtain a successful transformation into heavenly bodies. But their penances are quite unequal: Tecciztecatl’s fir tree branches (*axoyatl*, on which the bloodied spines were laid as offerings) are actually precious quetzal feathers, his grass ball (*zacatapayolli*, in which the spines were stuck) is gold, his bloodied maguey spines are coral, and his incense is costly, while Nanahuatl uses only commonplace ritual instruments, offering his own blood instead of coral and the scabs from his pustules for incense. But when, after four days, they have to leap into the fire, Tecciztecatl hesitates and Nanahuatl sacrifices himself first, dies, descends to the underworld, vanquishes death and emerges transformed into the rising sun. For having hesitated and been less valiant, Tecciztecatl only becomes the moon.¹⁸

The myth suggests that the efficacy of autosacrifice depends not on only the value of what is offered (Tecciztecatl does not see that blood is more precious than riches) but also on its sincerity.¹⁹ Nanahuatl humbles himself more than Tecciztecatl, who is satisfied with deceptive appearances and becomes the delusive moon whose glare actually comes from the sun. Furthermore here again the addressees of the bloodletting are not mentioned and the impression is conveyed that the act alone was sufficient to ensure the successful transformation by fire. The impression of a shortcut at the expense of the supreme couple is reinforced by the myth of Yappan told by Ruiz de Alarcón. According to his version of the creation of sun and moon, all the other creatures also were to be transformed according to their merits. One of them, called Yappan, did so much penance “in abstinence and chastity”, alone on a column, that, if he continued he would become a scorpion who would kill all his victims. To avoid this, the beautiful goddess Xochiquetzal seduced him, he sinned and therefore the sting of the scorpion is not always mortal.²⁰ Thus it

¹⁸ Several sources narrate this myth. Two are written in Nahuatl: the “Leyenda de los Soles” and Sahagún. Other important versions are to be found in the “Histoire du Méchique”, the “Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas”, Mendieta, *op. cit.*, and Alarcón, *Treatado de las supersticiones y costumbres gentilicas que oy viven entre los indios naturales desta Nueva España*. Only Mendieta and the Maya-Quiche, *Popol Vuh* situate the myth in its context. For an analysis, see Graulich, “The Metaphor of the Day in Ancient Mexican Myth and Ritual”, *Current Anthropology*, 1981, 22, 1, p. 45-60, and *Myths of Ancient Mexic.*

¹⁹ If blood is understandably more precious than riches, it is more difficult to explain why scabs are more delightful than incense. But both are part of the offerer himself, taking them away is painful—and therefore meritorious—and being a consequence of illness, scabs must connote sin. To burn scabs as incense may have been a recognition of sinfulness and a purification.

²⁰ Alarcón, *Treatise on the heathen superstitions that today live among the Indians native to this New Spain*, p. 204-208.

seems that by penance one can even obtain benefits that the gods are not willing to concede. It is however not clear whether the effect of penance is to accumulate power within the penitent, for instance by augmenting his inner fire, or if it involves the gods in debts they are bound to pay (like in the Hindu avatars of Vishnu), or, more probably, both.

As we have seen, usually autosacrifice precedes death and human sacrifice in myth. The "Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas" however is a remarkable exception to the rule: in this document the sacred war to obtain sacrificial victims precedes the first autosacrificial bloodletting at Teotihuacan. The explanation of this peculiarity lies in the fact that this source seems to be a theological treatise ordered by Motecuhzoma II in order to expound his religious reforms and the renewal of the flowery war in 1506. In the "Historia", the first war antedates by 13 years the birth of the sun, not because of a confused chronology, as has been asserted, but because sacred war has to nourish not only the sun, but also the earth deity who dominates the world alone during the period of darkness before the birth of the sun at the beginning of an era.²¹

The actors and the act

The rites of bloodletting are part of a general context of ordeals, mortifications and tortures, which were also demonstrations of endurance, prevalent almost everywhere in Indian America. Fasting, vigils, sexual continence and dance are other ascetic practices widely spread and frequent in Mesoamerica; flagellation;²² wearing clothes made of nettles,²³ chewing obsidian blades²⁴ and holding torches whose dripping resin burned the arms were less common.²⁵

Blood extraction was not only a ritual. It was commonly used by the physicians as a cure.²⁶ It was also a punishment for disobedient

²¹ On Montezuma's religious reforms, see Graulich, *Montezuma ou l'apogée et la chute de l'empire aztèque*, p. 96-126. Confused chronology, Baudot, *Utopie et histoire au Mexique. Les premiers chroniqueurs de la civilisation mexicaine (1520-1569)*, p. 191-2; Graulich, *Myths of Ancient Mexico*, p. 49.

²² *Codex Vaticanus A 55v*; Chimalpahin, *Relaciones originales de Chalco Amaquemecan*, p.147, 202.

²³ "Relación de Učila" in Francisco del Paso y Troncoso, *Papeles de la Nueva España*.

²⁴ Motolinía, *Historia ... III*, ch.14, p. 315.

²⁵ Durán, *op. cit.*, v.1, ch.13, p. 128.

²⁶ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex, General History of the Things of New Spain*, v. 10, p. 131-132. 143-144; Alarcón, *op. cit.*, ch.16, p. 19.

children and careless novices and could be inflicted on children or youngsters in initiation rites or to castigate penitents who fell asleep during vigils. But here the limit between ordinary and ritual behavior has become rather uncertain.²⁷

Bloodletting rituals were of course standard practice for the priests, who had to “earn merit” for the whole population; they were highly recommended for schoolboys, especially the noble ones and the novice priests. For the common people they were in part a matter of personal piety or could be imposed by a priest; they were frequent, especially during the great festivals. In circumstances such as the great New Fire ceremony every 52 years or the solemn fast during the festival of the month Ochpaniztli, they were compulsory for everybody, including small children.²⁸

Blood was drawn mostly from the ears and the tongue, also from the arms, thighs and legs, less often from the lips or nose, penis, breast, fingers or eyelids.²⁹ Durán’s assertion that the part of the body chosen for bleeding varied according to the temples and the customs of the different peoples is substantiated neither by his own data, nor by other sources.³⁰ On the other hand, Muñoz Camargo explains that the Indians used to bleed the part of the body through which they had sinned,³¹ but there is confirmation of a relationship only for the penis which priests reportedly pierced in order to avoid sinning. Actually Muñoz echoes Motolinía who explains that Quetzalcoatl drew blood from his ears and tongue “not to serve the demon, as is believed, but as a penance for the vice of the tongue and the hearing”.³² However Motolinía is unreliable in this case. He considers Quetzalcoatl as a religious reformer and a holy man close enough to a Christian for Cortés

²⁷ *Codex Mendoza*, f. 59, 62-63; Alarcón, *op. cit.*, ch.16, 19; Pomar, “Relación de la ciudad y provincia de Tezcoco”, in *Relaciones geográficas del siglo XVI: México*, v. 3, p. 74; Motolinía, *op. cit.*, I, ch.29, II, ch. 3-4.

²⁸ Pomar, *op. cit.*, p. 68; Motolinía, *op. cit.*, I, ch.4, p. 25; Durán, *op. cit.*, v. 1, p. 25-26, 137; Oviedo, *Historia general y natural de las Indias*, v. 2, p. 143; Sahagún, *Florentine Codex, General History...*, v. 6, p. 40; Las Casas, *op. cit.*, v. 2, p. 214. Juan Díaz, *La conquista de Tenochtitlan...*, p. 54, tells how Indians who first met Spaniards from Grijalva’s expedition in 1518 drew blood from their tongues “en señal de paz”. According to Durán (*op. cit.*, v. 1, ch.13 p.129), only the priests of the goddess Chantico-Cihuacoatl, guardian of the domestic fire, never drew blood. Instead they did penance every year, during the festival of Huey Tecuilhuitl, by letting resin from lighted torches burn their arms.

²⁹ Cortés, 1963: 67; Mártir, 1964-65,1: 426; *Codex Vaticanus A* f. 18; “Relación de Metztlán”, 1986: 63; Pomar, 1986:67; Carrasco, 1950: 206-7; Durán, ch.16, 19, 5 (1967: 1: 154, 170, 55). Eyelids: Muñoz Camargo, 1984: 195 and Serna, 1892: 350.

³⁰ *Op. cit.*, v 1, ch. 19, p. 170.

³¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 195.

³² *Op. cit.*, p. 7.

to have been mistaken for him and he therefore presents the god's penance as comparable with Christian penance.³³

The instruments for drawing blood were obsidian blades or maguey spines, but chips of reed and pointed resinous sticks were also used, while the rulers and lords often resorted to pointed eagle or jaguar bones.³⁴ Often straw, withes, ropes or sticks were passed through the perforated parts of the body to prolong and increase the pain.³⁵

Motolinía asserts that the number of straws passed through the wound corresponded to the number of sins.³⁶ This is not confirmed by the descriptions of confession in the *Florentine Codex* nor by other sources which state that the number of elements passed through depended on ritual prescriptions or on the penitent's devotion. On certain occasions, like the great festival of Camaxtli in the Valley of Puebla, the high priests went so far as to pass through their tongues 405 sticks as long as the arm and as thick as the wrist. In the Mixteca and in Tehuacan, Teotitlan and Cozcatlan, long ropes equally thick were passed through the penis.³⁷ Usually, the blood was offered to the gods, sometimes after the devotee had anointed his cheeks or temples, making his penance conspicuous, or strips of sacrificial papers, or wood, with it. Unlike in myth, the offering of blood to the gods was meant to nourish them, as indicated by the fact that sometimes the blood was collected and poured in the head or the mouth of the deity's effigy.³⁸

³³ Muñoz Camargo: "Sacábanse sangre de la lengua, si habían ofendido con ella hablando, y de los párpados de los ojos, por haber mirado, y de los brazos, por haber pecado de flojedad...". *The Codex Magliabechiano*, 21 v° states that blood was drawn from the penis to obtain children. In Sahagún (*Florentine Codex...*, v. 1 ch.12, p. 26-7) adultery must be expiated by passing twigs through the tongue and the penis, in v. VI, ch. 7, p. 33) only through the tongue.

³⁴ Obsidian blades: Mártir, *Décadas del Nuevo Mundo*, v 1, p. 420; Durán, *op. cit.*, v 1, ch. 2, p. 25; Pomar, *op. cit.*, p. 67; Motolinía *op. cit.*, v. 1, ch. 25; Gómara, *op. cit.*, v. 2, p. 413; "Relación de Tilantongo", p. 233. Maguey spines: Durán, *op. cit.*, v. 1, ch. 5 p. 54; they are profusely illustrated in the codices and in Aztec sculpture, as are pointed bones. Chips of reed: "Relación de Oaxtepec", p. 335; Alarcón, *op. cit.*, v. 1 ch.4. Pointed resinous sticks: *Codex Tudela*, f. 76. Stingray spines have also been found in offerings: López Luján, *Las ofrendas del Templo Mayor de Tenochtitlan*.

³⁵ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex...*, v. 2, p. 197. Motolinía, *Memoriales...*, v. 1, p. 25, 27; Pomar *op. cit.*, p. 67; Durán, *op. cit.*, v. 1 ch. 16, 19, p.157, 172.

³⁶ *Memoriales...*, v. 1, ch.25, 27.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, ch 25; Durán, *op. cit.*, v. 1, ch.19, p.170.

³⁸ Mártir, *op. cit.*, v. 1, p. 420; Motolinía, *op. cit.*, v. 1 ch.25; Gómara, *op. cit.*, v. 2, p. 413; Durán, *op. cit.*, v. 1, ch. 2, 5, p. 27, 54; Sahagún, *Codex Florentine...*, v. 5, p. 155; v. 9, p. 10. Paper streamers and wood: "Relación de Metztitlán", p. 63-64. Anointing effigies: Relaciones of Axocopan, Teteocomac, Tecpatepec, Tilantongo. The codices *Tudela* (f. 64, 76) and *Magliabechiano* (f. 87v°) illustrate nourishment of statues . It is also mentioned in the *Popol Vuh*, p. 187.

More often the statue was anointed with blood, or the blood was thrown in the air, or in the four directions, or offered to the fire, or placed before the idol.³⁹ Although “thick” and “fat”, “it wets the flesh; it moistens it like clay... it covers one with earth”, and therefore rather telluric, heavy, material, blood was supposed to vivify: it was “our life, our growth... it strengthens one greatly”.⁴⁰

The instruments

According to the myth of the creation of sun and moon and in ordinary ritual, the bloodied spines were put on fir branches (*acxoyatl*) or stuck in balls of plaited *zacate* grass (*zacatapayolli*). The symbolism of fresh *acxoyatl* was unknown to the late XVIth-century informants of the Texcocan mestizo of royal descent Juan Bautista de Pomar.⁴¹ In the Basin of Mexico, pines grow mostly on mountain slopes and one had to go fairly far to get fir branches. If need be they could be replaced by more common green reed, sometimes bound up in bundles.⁴² Fir and other branches were used to decorate the houses of noblemen and cult places. Like other boughs, they were sometimes used to purify.⁴³ Fragrant “*acxoyatl* water” used as “holy water” was sprinkled on the ashes of the cremated king.⁴⁴ We also know that the goddess of Ichcateopan was called the “*acxoyatl* woman” and was the wife of the “white priest”⁴⁵—probably an aspect of Tlaloc, the earth and rain deity husband or brother of the water goddess—. The “*acxoyatl* woman” would thus be linked to water, which, like fir, purifies.⁴⁶ The fir would then symbolize sacredness or holiness and purity. Needless to say, blood could also be offered directly to the (images or symbols of) the gods or to the four directions.

³⁹ Cortés, *Cartas y documentos*, p. 67; Mártir, *op. cit.*, v. 1, p. 426; Durán, *op. cit.*, v. 1, p. 27, 54, 157; Sahagún, *Codex Florentine...*, v. 5., p. 155; v.9, p. 10; “Relaciones de Metztlán, Iztepexi, Tilantongo, Temazcaltepec”. *Pöpol Vuh*, p. 187.

⁴⁰ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex...*, v. 10, p. 132; López Austin, *Cuerpo humano e ideología. Las concepciones de los antiguos nahuas*, v. 1, p.179; v. 2, p. 61, 126. On the opposition heavy, material vs/ light, less material, see Graulich, *Mythes et rituels du Mexique Central préhispanique*; “The Metaphor of the Day in Ancient Mexican Myth and Ritual”, *Current Anthropology*, 1981, 22, 1, p. 45-60; *Myths of Ancient Mexico*.

⁴¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 67-68.

⁴² Sahagún, *Florentine Codex...*, v. 2, p. 61, 83, 127; v 7, p. 4.

⁴³ Muñoz Camargo, *op. cit.*, f. 17 vº, p. 55; Martín de la Cruz, *Libellus de medicinalibus indorum herbis*, p. 75.

⁴⁴ Tezozómoc, *Crónica Mexicana*, p. 301, 456.

⁴⁵ *Relaciones geográficas del siglo XVI: Mexico*, v. 1, p. 263.

⁴⁶ Chalchiuhtlicue, the goddess of flowing water, as the purifier: Sahagún, *Florentine Codex* v. 6, p. 32.

The thin obsidian blades were highly respected. For solemn autosacrifices at least, they had to be prepared by "masters" who had been fasting before and they were put on a clean cloak. If one of them broke, the responsibility was attributed to the "master" who had not fasted well.⁴⁷ The blade was addressed by the calendarical name 1 Jaguar since it is black and therefore nocturnal-tellurical like the feline, and because it comes from the interior of the earth ; it was also called "the one who gets drunk at night", for it draws blood.⁴⁸

The maguery thorns (*huitzli*) were even more revered than the blades. They could be used only once and were very carefully kept and venerated. Sometimes the *zacate* balls with bloodied thorns stuck in it were exhibited on the walls of the temple buildings in order for everybody to see the pain endured for the people.⁴⁹ According to Sahagún's informants maguery thorns were a symbol of fierceness, rulership and nobility, and also of the Chichimec—that is, nomadic, barbarian—way of life as opposed to the civilized Tōltec one.⁵⁰ Like fir branches and *zacate*, maguery leaves could be strewed on the floor to honor deities.⁵¹ Thorns were a symbol of Quetzalcoatl, who appeared "with a big maguery thorn", and of Huitzilopochtli, whose sacred bundle in Texcoco consisted of two thorns.⁵² The relationship with Huitzilopochtli may be explained either by the fact that the Mexicas tended to substitute him for Quetzalcoatl, or because of his affinities with the South, the "country of thorns", and with barbarian wandering peoples. We know furthermore that Huitzilopochtli was born fleshless and there definitely is a relationship between bones and spines.⁵³ Thorns or spines were regarded as bony not only because of their aspect but also since according to myth the maguery was born from the bones of the goddess Mayahuel torn into pieces by her grandmother and her great-aunts.⁵⁴ And for the ancient Mesoamericans, bones were seed and bore fruit, and so did spines. After one of those banquets ensuring their social promotion, the merchants took care that their investments be productive. Therefore they put the spines with which they had drawn blood, the ashes from the censers and the remains of the cigars and flowers they had given their guests

⁴⁷ Motolinía, *op. cit.*, v. 1, ch. 27.

⁴⁸ Alarcón, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

⁴⁹ Durán, *op. cit.*, v. 1, p. 54.

⁵⁰ *Florentine Codex*...v. 6, p. 245.

⁵¹ See also "Anales de Cuauhtitlán", p. 3-5; Graulich, *Myths of Ancient Mexico*, p. 126. Leaves strewed: Durán, *op. cit.*, v. 1, p. 41.

⁵² "Histoyre du Méchique", f. 86; Pomar, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

⁵³ "Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas", f. 1.

⁵⁴ "Histoyre du Méchique", f. 84-85.

in the earth, like seeds. In this way, they said, their children's future would be secure. When planted in flesh, the spines produced merit that could be rewarded also by the birth of children. The children in turn were said to be "the thorns, the magueys", assimilated to cigars and *acxoyatl*, with which their parents did penance. Being seed, the spines could also be a promise of captives. If at night a valiant one met the ominous headless man, or the giant, or the rolling bundle of ashes, or the night axe—all of them transformations of the great nocturnal deity Tezcatlipoca, the Smoking Mirror, the fearful magician—, and if instead of running away he rushed at him and tore his heart from his chest, then he was in a position to dictate his conditions and to demand several thorns which were the promise of as many prisoners captured in war to be sacrificed and of riches.⁵⁵

The thorns being (like) seed, the *zacatapayolli* in which they are planted possibly represents the tilled earth. Unfortunately, very little is known about the symbolism of the zacate grass or straw. It was associated with the Chichimecs and was strewn on the floor when guests or messengers were expected, or to honor gods or impersonators of deities wearing flayed skins.⁵⁶ Maybe it referred to the dry season, which began with the harvests. In the iconography the fruits of the sowing of thorns in grass balls are represented by the jade and the flower which usually adorn the bloodied thorns stuck in the ball. The other main instruments for autosacrifice are also related to seed. It is clearly so for pointed bones, while obsidian blades, originating from the earth, are related to flint, born from the heaven, as young shoots are to the seed.⁵⁷

We have seen that "tobacco tubes" or cigars are sometimes mentioned together with thorns and *acxoyatl* as instruments of mortification. Tobacco was one of the first offerings to the creators. It was regarded as a hot plant that made forget hunger, pain and weariness. It heals certain illnesses, possesses who takes it and acts as protecting spirit.⁵⁸ According to one source, tobacco was also considered the body of the earth goddess Cihuacoatl, but perhaps this relationship is valid only for the leaf surrounding it.⁵⁹ Be that as it may, it is also closely related to the lunar sun of the afternoon⁶⁰—the sun that when it sets

⁵⁵ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex...*, v. 5, p. 158, 175; v. 6, p. 48, 94, 172, 177; v. 9, p. 40.

⁵⁶ Durán, *op. cit.*, v.1, p. 140.

⁵⁷ Graulich, *Myths of Ancient Mexico*, p. 108.

⁵⁸ Motolinía, *op. cit.*, v. II, ch.10; Sahagún, *Florentine Codex...*, v. 11, p. 146; Alarcón, *op. cit.*, p. 54-57; Pomar, *op. cit.*, p. 109; Ixtlilxóchitl, *Obras históricas*, v 2, p. 74.

⁵⁹ Torquemada, *op. cit.*, v. 2, p. 83; "Relación de Miahuatlán", p. 130.

⁶⁰ Graulich, "The Metaphor of the Day in Ancient Mexican Myth and Ritual", *Current Anthropology*, 1981, 22, 1, p. 45-60.

fecundates the earth— and the present-day Otomi see it as a phallic symbol.⁶¹ To sum up, the relationship between tobacco, thorns and *acxoyatl* is to be found in the fact that they are plants and offerings, that they establish contact with the suprahuman and that they are related with seed and fecundation. *Acxoyatl* and thorns also purify, and we may conjecture that tobacco does so too.⁶²

Paying the debt

By offering their blood the humans pay their debt and earn merit. The notions of debt and merit are fundamental in Aztec sacrificial theory. Just in the same way as the gods are indebted to the supreme creators for having received life, so the humans are the debtors of the gods who created them, they have to earn merit for having been merited: *ye ica otopan tlamazeuhque*, “because on us [the bones from which humans were created] they did penance”.⁶³

The gods are also the ones who give humans their rain, food and riches, as Aztec ancients explained to the first missionaries.⁶⁴

This is why there must be “payment of the debt”, by mortifying the flesh pending payment of the final tribute of death.⁶⁵ The *nextlahualli* has been defined either as extraction of blood in autosacrifice or as the ritual killing of children for the rain gods. It is true that the term is often used to designate sacrifices to the Tlalocs and that only these gods are described as granting loans to humans. But the same word also means human sacrifices generally as well as rituals without killing or even without bloodshed, like offering of copal and paper.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Galinier, *La mitad del mundo. Cuerpo y cosmos en los rituales otomíes*, p. 190. For the Huichol, tobacco is the ancestor Fire: Furst, *Los alucinógenos y la cultura*, p. 58-59.

⁶² Alarcón, *op. cit.*, p. 194-196.

⁶³ “Leyenda de los Soles”, p. 76; *Popol Vuh*, p. 164-165.

⁶⁴ Sahagún, *Coloquios y doctrina cristiana*, f. 34-35. On the notion of debt, see Brundage, *The Jade Steps. A Ritual Life of the Aztecs*, p. 157, 187-189; López Austin, *Los mitos del tlacuache. Caminos de la mitología mesoamericana*, p. 213-214; Clendinnen, *Aztecs, an interpretation*, p. 255.

⁶⁵ Sahagún, *Florentine Cdex...*, v. 6, p. 4, 17.

⁶⁶ Molina, s.v. *nextlahualli*: “sacrificio de sangre, que ofrecían a los ydolos, sajandose o horodando alguna parte del cuerpo”; “*ixtlaua. nilla*: pagar lo que se deue”; Seler, *Gesammelte Abhandlungen zur Amerikanischen Sprach- und Altertumskunde*, v. 2, p. 983; Sacrifices of children: Preuss, “Die Feuergötter als Ausgangspunkt zum Verständnis der mexikanischen Religion in ihrem Zusammenhang” in *Mitteilungen der Wiener Anthropologischen Gesellschaft*, 1903, 33, p. 188. *Nextlahualli* is synonymous with sacrificial death. In Sahagún (*Primeros Memoriales*, p. 21, 51; *Florentine Codex...*, v. 2, p. 224 and “Anales de Cuauhtitlán” (p. 9),

By paying his debt one can either expiate past shortcomings, or acquire merit (*tlama'cehua*: the verb is often given the sense of humiliating oneself) that calls for a reward.⁶⁷ These two consequences are well illustrated in an admonition of a soothsayer who imposes bloodletting to a penitent who confesses his sins, adding: “do not only earn merit, but throw away dust and dirt [= sin]”.⁶⁸ Merit is also acquired through purity, chastity, vigils and prayer. It is lost through sin generally, and half-heartedness or laziness, arrogance, neglecting to humiliate oneself or interrupting one’s mortifications. Merit also compensates for an unfavorable birthday sign (*tonalli*), but only to some degree since one’s *tonalli* appears to be at least partly determined by the merit and the condition of one’s parents. Certain texts do mention people who are born without desert: “Or perhaps also thou wert born without desert, without merit; perhaps thou hast been born as a little smutty ear of maize”.⁶⁹

The *tonalli* is linked to the animal *alter ego* which is usually powerful in the case of noblemen but much less so among commoners. One should also mention a quite remarkable tendency that denies merit and claims that only Tezcatlipoca’s benevolence saves:

in truth it is so that no one is verily the possessor of reward, no one is to say he is the possessor of merit; for it is only thou who showest compassion to one, who selectest one, extractest one from excrement, from filth; thou cleanest, thou bathest one. And thou humblest one.⁷⁰

The occasions for autosacrifice

The occasions of autosacrifice enumerated in the sources are manifold but it should be kept in mind that not all are mentioned and that the motivations suggested by ancient authors, and especially by Durán, who too often speaks of expiations, are difficult to verify.

nextlahualli designates sacrifices of children. In the “Anales de Cuauhtitlán” (p. 5) and Sahagún (*Florentine Codex...*, v. 2, p. 49, 180, 181), it means human sacrifices in general. In Sahagún (*ibidem*, p. 199), *nextlahualiztli* is described as “when mayhap something had befallen one, perchance sickness, when he recovered, then perchance he paid his debt with incense or paper. Because he had not died, he paid his debt in this manner...”. Other passages referring to non-bloody rituals are, e.g., Sahagún (*ibidem*, v. 2, p. 199; v. 5, p. 152; v. 9, p. 10, 27, 31, 39); Chimalpahin, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

⁶⁷ In Sahagún *Florentine Codex...*, v. 4, p. 34, humiliating oneself is synonym to deserv-
ing: *tlauellamaceoa, mocnomati*.

⁶⁸ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex...*, v. 1, p. 26-27. Unless otherwise stated, quoted translations from the *Florentine Codex* are by Anderson and Dibble.

⁶⁹ Sahagún, *ibidem*, v. 4, p. 7, 85; v. 5, p. 158; v. 6, p. 114-117, 168, 215; v. 7, p. 7.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, v. 6, p. 9.

Concerning the irregular occasions, at birth a boy's ears and fore-skin was "sacrificed" incised, especially if he was of noble descent, but the meaning of the ritual is unclear.⁷¹ Mendieta mentions circumcision among the Totonacs.⁷² In the schools for nobles and priests (*calmecac*), blood extraction by the boys was frequent.⁷³ A newly-married couple was bound to perform autosacrifice during the first four days, and the nobles before becoming lords.⁷⁴ Blood was drawn to soothe the gods in case of bad omen; as a penance after auricular confession; when pilgrimages were carried out to the mountains in order to receive favors; to thank them for benefits received; before going on a journey, on the way and when returning home, especially the merchants; possibly before a battle; probably before making an image or a statue, as among the Maya; to make sowed land fructify; when harvesting the first tender ears of maize, to nourish them and the fire; during solar eclipses, when they "threw the blood with the fingers towards the sun", obviously to strengthen it; at Venus's rising, probably for the same reason; and in the event of disasters, to placate the gods.⁷⁵

Autosacrificial rites of the rulers deserve particular attention because of their importance for the welfare of the whole population and because they are often depicted on Aztec and Maya reliefs. According to the sources, the ruler let blood probably when, still a young warrior, he first manages to take a captive; certainly at his coronation (before his inaugural campaign), before going to the wars; after a victory, when submitting to the god of a victorious city, on festivals like the sun's birthday on the day 4 Movement, and at the time of exceptional events, like drought, as testified by the iconography of the "Metro Block".⁷⁶ In addition to these official occasions recorded by

⁷¹ Durán, *op. cit.*, v. 1, p. 57.

⁷² *Op. cit.*, v. II, ch.19.

⁷³ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex...*, v. 6, ch. 40.

⁷⁴ Motolinía, *op. cit.*, ch. 5, 11.

⁷⁵ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex...*, v. 5, p. 151-155; v. 1, p. 12; v. 6, ch. 7; v. 9, ch. 3, 6, 8; Durán, *op. cit.*, v. 1, p. 154; Palacio, "Relación hecha por el licenciado Palacio al Rey D. Felipe II, en la que describe la provincia de Guatemala...", *Colección de documentos inéditos relativos al descubrimiento, conquista y organización de las antiguas posesiones españolas de América y Oceanía*, L. Torres de Mendoza ed., t. VI, Madrid, 1866, p. 29; Muñoz Camargo, *op. cit.*, p. 195; Alarcón, *op. cit.*, p. 54-57; Motolinía, *op. cit.*, v. 1, ch.15; Cervantes de Salazar, *Crónica de la Nueva España*, p. 163; Ponce de León, "Tratado de los dioses y ritos de la gentilidad" in *Teogonía e historia de los mexicanos: tres opúsculos del siglo XVI*, p. 127; Motolinía, *op. cit.*, v. I, ch.16; Durán, *op. cit.*, v. 2, p. 376-378.

⁷⁶ Motolinía, *op. cit.*, v. II, p. 14; Sahagún, *Florentine Codex...*, v. I, App. (possibly he also drew blood when he fasted during the great festivals, or for Tlaloc or the sun, v. 2, p.214; Durán, *op. cit.*, v. 2, p. 161, 274, 301-303, 317-318, 364-366, 389, 400, 409, 431,

the chronicles there were of course also bloodlettings dictated by each ruler's personal piety.

The regular bloodlettings comprise first the daily ones performed by priests or the frequent ones of the "four year fasters" who, like in Tehuacan, relayed each other every four years, probably for the acquisition of merit for the city to continue uninterrupted.⁷⁷ As a matter of fact we may conjecture that the constant mortifications of the priests and, in a lesser degree, the rulers, the noblemen and the population were supposed to contribute to keep the sky in its place, the rivers flowing, the rains falling, the harvests growing, the "world machine" going. This is strongly suggested by the consequences of Quetzalcoatl's neglect of his sacerdotal and royal duties in the myth of the end of Tollan summarized above.⁷⁸

There were also the bloodlettings dictated by the solemn festivals of the eighteen 20-day months of the solar year.⁷⁹ To prepare themselves the dignitaries are reported to have fasted and "merited" during the 4 or 5 days preceding the festival proper (around the 20th day). For the priests this preparation could last 80 or even 160 days, for instance at Tlaxcala before the festival of Tlacaxipehualiztli.⁸⁰ Every four years this celebration gave rise to what could be described as a true potlatch, during which the priests gained prestige by outdoing one another in the harshness of their fasts and penance. It was

484, 536. On the Metro Block, see Klein, *op. cit.*, p. 326-327. We know from the sources that Motecuhzoma II's reign was plagued from the start, in 1502 (10 Rabbit, the date on the Block) by a severe drought (Graulich, *Montezuma ou l'apogée et la chute de l'empire aztèque*, p. 117-118.

⁷⁷ Motolinía, *op. cit.*, v. 1, ch.17, 25, 27; Cortés, *op. cit.*, p. 67; Durán, *op. cit.*, v. 1, p. 54.

⁷⁸ This may partly explain why any shortcoming from the fasting priests was severely punished, sometimes with death. Sahagún (*Florentine Codex...*, v. 1, p. 22) informs us that Motecuhzoma "gains rain, does penance (merits) for his macehualtin (people)".

⁷⁹ On these festivals, see Selser, "Die achtzehn Jahresfeste der Mexikaner" (I Hälfte), *Altmexikanische Studien* 2, *Vöffentlichungen aus dem Königlichen Museum für Völkerkunde*, 1899, 6, 2/4, Berlin, p.67-209; Broda, "Tlacaxipehualiztli : A reconstruction of an Aztec calendar festival from 16th century sources", *Revista Española de Antropología Americana* 1970, 6: 197-274; Graulich, *Rituales aztecas. Las fiestas de las veintenas*; parts of this last study on the festivals of the solar year published in Graulich, "The Metaphor of the Day in Ancient Mexican Myth and Ritual", *Current Anthropology*, 1981, 22, 1, p. 45-60; "Tlacaxipehualiztli ou la fête aztèque de la moisson et de la guerre", *Revista Española de Antropología Americana*, 1982, 12, p. 215-254.1981, see "Les fêtes mobiles des Aztèques", *Annuaire de l'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Section des sciences religieuses*, 1992, 99: 31-7, on the festivals of the 260-day calendar.

⁸⁰ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex...*, v. 2, App. p. 3; "Relación de Oaxtepec", p. 335; "Relación de Metztlán", p. 63; Motolinía, *op. cit.*, v. 1, ch. 25, p. 27.

during this festival that the oldest high priests passed some 405 sticks through their tongues and others only 200.⁸¹

During the eighteen 20-day months, bloodletting was also practiced on or by children, fathers, the whole population, priests, youths, hunters, women who offered slaves to be sacrificed, warriors, etcetera, according to the deities and the seasonal events celebrated.

Every 52 years the ancient Mexicans celebrated the festival of the "binding of the years" in which new fire was more solemnly ignited than during yearly festivals in order to ensure that the sun would rise again for the new 52-years period to come. When the fire had caught, everyone let blood from their ears and spattered it toward the fire, thus nourishing it for the sun to be born again in it.⁸²

Other festivals were the birthdays of the gods. Some are well documented, in particular the birthday of the sun, 4 Movement, when everyone was supposed to draw blood. Even children in their cradles had their ears cut. Noble youths cut their lefts arms between skin and flesh with obsidian blades and passed reeds through it which were cast to an image of the sun. The more reeds offered in this way, the more valiant and penitent one was considered. The sources agree in saying that the first goal was to nourish the sun.⁸³

It should be stressed again that ritual bloodlettings were more frequent than what is mentioned in the written sources. The reliefs of the precinct of the Eagles north of the main pyramid of Mexico-Tenochtitlan represent processions of lords and warriors heading for a grass ball with bloodstained thorns and archaeological investigation has shown that much bloodletting took place in this building. As far as we know, the only opportunities for frequent autosacrifices of lords and warriors were the vigils of the sacrificers with their victims before the immolation; bloodletting in this context should have contributed to the sacrificer's assimilation with his victim and to his partaking of the latter's death. It is therefore probable that the reliefs document such penances.⁸⁴

⁸¹ The number of 405 alludes to a myth in the "Leyenda" (p. 78-79) narrating the first war after the birth of the sun at Teotihuacan. According to this myth, 400 Mimixcoas were vanquished by their four brothers and their sister and given to Sun and Earth to nourish them: Graulich, "Tlacaxipehualiztli ou la fête aztèque de la moisson et de la guerre", *Revista Española de Antropología Americana*, 1982, p. 238.

⁸² Sahagún, *Florentine Codex...*, v. 7, ch. 10, p. 28.

⁸³ Sahagún, *op. cit.*, v. 4, ch. 2; App., p. 6-7; v. 2, p. 202-203; Durán, *op. cit.*, v. 1, p. 108.

⁸⁴ In the sense given to the word by Hubert and Mauss, *Sacrifice: its nature and function* p. 10: "We give the name 'sacrificer' to the subject to whom the benefits of sacrifice thus accrue, or who undergoes its effects." Penances of the sacrificers are mentioned for example in Sahagún, *Florentine Codex...*, v. 1, p. 208.

Motivations

We have seen that in myth, the gods humbled themselves by drawing blood, thus recognizing the superiority of their creators, in order to oblige them and:

1. obtain the creation of the universe (Mixtec myth);
2. preserve the (paradisiacal) state of things (Quetzalcoatl at Tollan);
3. obtain humans to serve them (Quetzalcoatl in the underworld);
4. obtain a glorious transformation after death (Teotihuacan). In this case, their ordeal may also have had an expiatory and/or purificatory aspect before the final sacrifice of their lives.⁸⁵

We also know that blood could vivify (bones of former humans) and that bloodletting increased the power of the ascetic.

The same general motivations: obtain, preserve, purify, vivify, also characterize bloodletting performed by humans. The recipients however are not the same. There was no need for the immortal supreme creators to be fed by blood. The other gods on the contrary had become mortal after their transgression and even after their metamorphosis and their return to the other worlds, they seem to have go on needing to be alimented and revived, notably with blood.

As in myth, more often the purpose of bloodletting was to obtain something or to give thanks.⁸⁶ The rewards were numerous and varied. For a group, the reward could be to reach the promised land, conquests and empire,⁸⁷ a smooth-running “world machine”, prosperity, rain, plentiful harvests, pity for the poor, widows and orphans...;⁸⁸ for an individual, to secure children, health, riches, honors, a long life, a good marriage, success at war, a pleasant journey, power, and so on.⁸⁹ But above all, inflicting symbolical deaths on oneself by

⁸⁵ Compare with the bathing of slaves impersonating deities in ordre to purify them before their sacrifice.

⁸⁶ Durán, *op. cit.*, v. 1, p. 139; v. 2, p. 274, 363; Sahagún, *Florentine Codex...*, v. 9, p. 27, 31; Motolinía, *op. cit.*, v. II, ch. 10, p. 24.

⁸⁷ Chimalpahin, *op. cit.*, p. 64, 74, 134; Castillo, *Historia de la venida de los mexicanos y otros pueblos e Historia de la conquista*, p. 120-121.

⁸⁸ Durán, *op. cit.*, v. 2, p. 536.

⁸⁹ Las Casas, *Apologética Historia Sumaria*, p. 225-226; Sahagún, *Florentine Codex...*, v. 2, p. 81; v. 4, p. 85, 34; v. 5, p. 158; v. 6, p. 88-9, 138, 184, 215; v. 9, p. 40; Durán, *op. cit.*, v. 1, p. 55, 171; “Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas”, ch. 8.

autosacrifice could earn a favorable type of death leading to a happy afterlife.⁹⁰

The Indians also bled themselves to give thanks for the benefits obtained—that is, to pay more debts—for instance, a battle gained.⁹¹

Autosacrifice was often performed to expiate transgressions, as in Teotihuacan. A frequent punishment for novices who neglected their duties, it also sanctioned adultery, urinating against a temple wall, and many minor sins, and helped to avoid sin.⁹² Another function was to appease deities in dangerous situations such as a heliacal rising of Venus or an eclipse.⁹³

To shed blood was an act of humility. No wonder then that a vanquished lord would be invited to perform autosacrifice before the deity of the victorious city.⁹⁴ It made the gods benevolent by feeding them but sometimes it had a more immediate effect resembling refueling, when it was directed to deities like the Fire god or the sun, Tonatiuh, during the New Fire ceremony, or when it vivified seeds, plants and monarchs.

I have suggested elsewhere that autosacrifice could also be a substitute for death—the ultimate debt—.⁹⁵ In addition to the fact that it was performed by sacrificers who were supposed to die symbolically through their victims, indirect evidence in this sense is to be found in the basic meaning of a ritual that claims to pay the debt of life with blood, the very symbol of life; and the fact that it was part of the penance that, after confession, ensured resurrection after the symbolical death that was sin:

Thou hast come to emerge, thou hast come to appear; for thou hast descended into, thou hast beheld the land of the dead, the heavens.

⁹⁰ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex...*, v. 6, p. 11, 12, 114 -117, 164, 172. Interpretation of Mesoamerican afterlife is still dominated by the evolutionist hypotheses of Tylor, *La civilisation primitive*, v. 2, p. 1-57, who tried to demonstrate that in that kind of civilizations there was not or hardly any reward in the hereafter of the moral conduct on earth. For a different view, see Graulich, "Afterlife in Ancient Mexican Thought", *Circumpacifica, Festschrift für Thomas S. Barthel*, ed. by B. Illius and M. Laubscher, 2 v., Frankfurt, Bern, New York, Paris, 1990; *Myths of Ancient Mexico*, p. 248-263; Ragot, *Les au-delàs aztèques. Approche des conceptions sur la mort et le devenir des morts*.

⁹¹ Motolinía, *op. cit.*, v. II, ch. 20; Durán, *op. Cit.*, v. 1, p. 139, 277.

⁹² Sahagún, *Florentine Codex...*, v. 1, p. 26-27; v. 3, p. 64; v. 6, p. 32-33, 215; v. 9, p. 10-11; "Codex Vaticanus A", p.104; Durán, *op. cit.*, v. 1, p. 42, 55, 139, 172.

⁹³ Motolinía, *op. cit.*, v. 1, ch. 16; Durán, *op. cit.*, v. 1, p. 340, v. 2, p. 489.

⁹⁴ Durán, *op. cit.*, v. 2, p. 161.

⁹⁵ Graulich, "The Metaphor of the Day in Ancient Mexican Myth and Ritual", *Current Anthropology*, 1981, 22, 1, p. 45-60; "Aztec human sacrifice as expiation", *History of Religions*, 2000, 39, 4, p. 352-371.

Now our lord hath caused the sun to shine, [...] Now thou causeth the sun to appear, to come forth. Now once again thou art rejuvenated, thou emergest as a child. [...] And because thou hast found pleasure in filth, in vice, thou art twice [daily] to pass twigs, once through thy ear, once through thy tongue, especially because of adultery...⁹⁶

The motivations and effects of autosacrifice are so diverse and its early history so poorly known that nothing allows us to state that “probably the most archaic form of the practice was directed toward agricultural fertility”.⁹⁷

Sometimes through bloodletting and other mortifications a direct contact was established voluntarily or not with the deity who appeared to or spoke to the devotee to transmit him a message. Motolinía explains that the permanent fasters of Tehuacan often claimed to have seen “the demon” who told them what the gods wanted; the most common vision was a long-haired head.⁹⁸

Autosacrifice could also be ominous or reveal things. At Tehuacan it was thought that if a priest died from his mortifications, there would be great mortality and many rulers and lords would die. In the same area, fainting while passing a rope through the penis was regarded as proof that one had sinned with a woman.⁹⁹

The myths have shown that autosacrifice could also take effect without, or against the gods. It could be used for unavowable purposes, like seducing a woman or killing. Mendieta was told that “some did penance to gratify their evil carnal desire with the person who pleased him”¹⁰⁰ and Sahagún mentions sorcerers who bled themselves on the person they wanted to kill.¹⁰¹ Such cases suggest that mortifications increased one’s personal power automatically, or that the gods could not refuse it. This power is related to the *tonalli* that can be reinforced through asceticism and weakened by sin.¹⁰² The *tonalli* is

⁹⁶ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex...*, v. 6, p. 32-33.

⁹⁷ Klein, *op. cit.*, p. 295-296. To evoke the Mixtec creation myth quoted above in this context is inappropriate: it is true that the gods sprinkled their own blood directly on the first trees and plants, but not in order for these to multiply and cover the earth: the text explains clearly that the bloodlettings were to oblige the creators to create —and that the orchard was splendid and in no need of fertilization. Furthermore, a creation myth does not necessarily inform us about an archaic state of things—.

⁹⁸ *Op. cit.*, v. 1, ch. 25; Alarcón, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

⁹⁹ Motolinía, *op. cit.*, v. 1, ch. 25.

¹⁰⁰ *Op. cit.*, v. 1, p. 117.

¹⁰¹ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex...*, v. 10, p. 32; López Austin, “Cuarenta clases de magos en el mundo azteca”, *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl*, 1967, 7, p. 90-91.

¹⁰² Sahagún, *Florentine Codex...*, v. 4, p. 25. See also the “Título de Totonicapan”, in the *Memorial de Solóla*, p. 220: “Perhaps they are valiant and as it were full of divine fire

not only the day sign, it is first of all heat and life is heat, *tonalli* is the spark of life that is kindled by the supreme couple and descends in the womb of the woman at conception, it is inner fire, of celestial origin but exiled on earth and prisoner of a material body.¹⁰³ It is this inner fire that Quetzalcoatl and Teciztecatl try and strengthen by their unequal penances before they destroy their bodies in the brazier and become sun and moon.¹⁰⁴

Political and social aspects

Spectacular bloodlettings were not without social consequences. They were a way of earning prestige in societies where prestige was constantly sought for. The priests and fasters “received great satisfaction and vainglory from it” —although pride was branded as a major sin— and tried to transcend their colleagues.¹⁰⁵ In the different corporations (e.g. the merchants, particularly well documented) and in the ruling class, it certainly contributed to one’s promotion while in the sacerdotal career it could lead to an office of “sacristan” (*tlamacazqui*) in a temple, then to priest, and, we may conjecture, if the sacrificial zeal was kept high or increased, to higher positions.¹⁰⁶

With regard to the social aspects of autosacrifice, an attempt has been made to explain autosacrifice by its political usefulness and as a device to reinforce control of the people by rulers and noblemen. According to this interpretation, by letting blood, Quetzalcoatl, “from whom all members of the nobility were thought to descend [... ..]” created a new race of people, a race described in the “Leyenda de los Soles” as “the vassals of the gods”, and “the first act of bloodletting

because they do not know other women. Let us choose and ornate three beautiful young girls: if they fall in love with them, their *nahuales* [here in the sense of protecting deities] will despise them and [...] we will easily kill them.”

¹⁰³ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex...*, v. 3, p. 39; in his *Vocabulario*, Molina translates *tonalli* by “calor del sol, o tiempo de estío”; *tona*: “hacer calor o sol”. On the *tonalli* see López Austin, *Cuerpo humano e ideología. Las concepciones de los antiguos nahuas*, v. 1, p. 223-251; J. Furst, *op. cit.*, p. 63-108; González Torres, “El concepto de tona”, *Boletín del INAH*, 1976, 19, p. 13-16. On the celestial spark of life: Sahagún, *Florentine Codex...*, v. 4, p. 32, 34, 37; v. 10, p. 29; v. 6, p. 175, 183, 202; v. 10, p. 169, and *Códices Matritenses*, f.175 v^o.

¹⁰⁴ Some texts nevertheless suggest that the increase or decrease of inner fire depends on the gods. We read in the *Po'ol Vuh* (p. 186-187): “we only draw cords through our ears and elbows when we ask for our strength and our manhood from [the gods] Tohil, Aulix, and Hacauitz”.

¹⁰⁵ Durán, *op. cit.*, v. 1, p. 55, 170.

¹⁰⁶ Motolinía, *op. cit.*, v. 1, p. 16. Data are lacking to say that ability to endure the pain of bloodletting was a major means to status and advancement and to become a ruler.

thus was presented in myth as performed by the archetypal noble for the express purpose of creating a subservient commoner class. The message encoded in this, of course, is that the latter owed its very existence to the nobility.” However the meaning of the “Leyenda’s” passage is very clear: what is stated is that the gods created the humans—all of them, the noblemen included—to serve them. Therefore they are the god’s vassals. Other versions of the myth of the creation of the first humans are quite explicit in this respect. Mendieta copying fray Andrés de Olmos, one of the first Spanish chroniclers of Aztec culture, explains that the gods asked their mother, who had exiled them on earth, “permission, power and way to create humans, *so that they may receive some service*”.¹⁰⁷

The nahuatl word translated as “vassal” is *macehualli*, which effectively means subject, vassal, commoner; but also indigenous person, speaker of nahuatl, or human generally.¹⁰⁸ The authors of the “Leyenda” used this word not only therefore, but also to pun with the verb *ma’cehualli: quitoque otlacatque in teteo in macehuallin, ye ica otopantlamaçehuhque* (they [the gods] said: “the gods and the vassals [or humans] are born”, because on us they deserved [or, did penance]).¹⁰⁹

In others words, the humans (*macehuallin*) are deserved by the penance (*ma’cehua*) of the gods. Moreover, it would be very difficult to show that the noblemen were supposed to descend from Quetzalcoatl. As far as I know, only one manipulated XVIth century text establishes a genealogical link between the god and the Aztec kings.¹¹⁰ Moreover, Quetzalcoatl was assimilated to poor and humble Nanahuatl.

It is clear then that there is altogether no trace of class struggle involved in autosacrifice. If the commoners are “merited” in any way by the nobility, it is because the nobility conquered them and is supposed to fight to protect them, but this has nothing to do with myth. Nor is there any reason to suppose that “the bloodletting act carried a somewhat different meaning when performed by the commoner as opposed to the noble”, or that the sun, who had to be fed by humans,

¹⁰⁷ *Op. cit.*, v. 1, p. 83.

¹⁰⁸ Karttunen, *An Analytical Dictionary of Nahuatl*; Sahagún, *Coloquios y doctrina cristiana*, p. 128-129.

¹⁰⁹ Another possibly more correct translation is: “the gods and the vassals are born”, the idea being that the gods are gods only from the moment they have creatures or vassals they created.

¹¹⁰ A text of Tezozómoc, *Crónica Mexicana*, p. 659, produced to prove that the Aztec kings “claimed to directly descend” from Quetzalcoatl only says that Quetzalcoatl was “the origin and beginning” of the Aztec dynasty; that is—as often repeated—, that the Aztec kings are *successors*, not descendants of Quetzalcoatl. Furthermore, ancient Mexican kingship was theoretically elective and may have been so at its beginnings.

“symbolized the rule of the nobility”. On the contrary, Nanahuatl, an avatar of Quetzalcoatl, who becomes the sun is presented, like most Mesoamerican heroes, as a poor and humble newcomer who vanquishes his wealthy but decadent elders.

Conclusion

To sum up, autosacrifice appears as one of the most current and efficient ways to establish contact with and conciliate or propitiate the gods. It is a strong response to the foremost duty of the creatures: to recognize the superiority of their creators and acknowledge the debt of having received life. Before the first transgression and the creation of humans, it was the supreme offering the gods could make to their creators, an offering that was part of themselves and bound the recipients. It was pain inflicted in the hope of obliging, binding, and receiving something in exchange. After the transgression, the supreme offering became one's own life, but an oblation of one's blood could symbolize it.

Physically, bloodletting lightened the performer, who lost a clayey fat substance, but augmented his “less material” inner part: his inner fire or *tonalli*, his power—as ascetic practices usually do—. It was also a means to increase endurance of pain and could be ominous or reveal past transgression. Through visions, it could even connect directly with the deity. The instruments for drawing blood were associated with seed for the merits they produced. The *zacatapayolli* may have symbolized a field and *acxoyatl* purity. The parts of the body that were bled varied for unclear reasons; the fact that they were unequally painful may have played a part. The recipients were first the supreme deity, who took it as homage, then the gods, who were vivified by the blood, but the recipients could also be objects like bones and ashes, seeds for sowing, harvests... The creation myths suggest that such vivifying action, that is, creation, could not be efficient without intervention of the gods; but they also suggest that the gods were obliged to respond. Drawn blood could vivify; but it could also kill, or give lethal power.

Bloodletting was done to “pay the debt” and to earn merit, to receive benefits (for oneself, a family, a collectivity) or to give thanks for them, to expiate transgressions, to prefigure one's (own) death or to partake of the death of sacrificial victims, to gain a happy after-life... It could also be performed for totally different, unavowable goals. There was often an accumulation of effects: one could at the

same time humiliate oneself, acquire power, nourish harvests and gods, expiate sins, die symbolically and earn merit for this or the other life.

The priests were the group who performed the ritual most often: together with the rulers they had to deserve in order for the universe to go on uninterrupted. But all the other citizens had to shed blood at one time or another during the many occasions offered by the different calendars or the circumstances of life.

Socially, performing autosacrifice earned considerable prestige and played a role at least in the career of priests. Political usefulness as an instrument to control the people is not demonstrated.

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