

**Power, Performance and Propaganda –
Sociopolitical Aspects of the Aztec Feast of
Toxcatl**

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0. General introduction

Aztec religious ceremonies have been extensively investigated since the emergence of Mesoamerican studies. Already at an early stage of research scholars like Eduard Seler and Paul Kirchhoff analyzed the structure of Mesoamerican ceremonial calendars and examined the sequences of rituals celebrated each month, all in search for a consistent pattern; soon they realized that the real purpose of the Aztec festivals was much more than to perform a simple rite - the Aztec religious ceremonies possessed complex structure, their rituals followed elaborated scenarios and conveyed multifaceted symbolical meaning, and additionally they fulfilled various social functions.

This dissertation deals with the Toxcatl ceremony named after the fifth month, or *veintena*, of the Aztec ritual calendar *xiuhpohualli*.¹ This festival was held annually in many Aztec cities and it was dedicated to warrior gods

¹ The following sequence of the calendar festivals in the *xiuhpohualli* had been proposed by Bernardino de Sahagún in the second volume of the Florentine Codex (Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 9); since some authors suggested that Aztec cities did not necessarily synchronize their calendars and that some of them may have begun the year with different months (Broda 1969; Caso 1958), this particular order is believed to apply to the city of Tenochtitlan (Caso 1958).

The Aztecs used two different calendric periods to measure time: the first was called *tonalpohualli* (Nahuatl: “count of days”) and it was organized into 20 time periods consisting of 13 days (*trecenas*). *Tonalpohualli* is believed to have served as an almanac and it had helped determine the auspices under which each person was born. The second type of count was called *xiuhpohualli* (Nahuatl: “the year count”); it was a 365-day solar calendar consisting of 18 “months” (called *veintenas*). Both calendars would coincide once every 52 years, marking the completion of the full “calendar round”.

Tezcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli. The most characteristic feature attributed to Toxcatl by several 16th- and 17th-century sources on the pre-conquest Aztec religion was a ritual sacrifice of a young man, probably a war captive, who served as a “living image” of Tezcatlipoca for a period of one calendar year preceding the ceremonies.

The following paper is a comprehensive analysis of the possible functions that Toxcatl had played in various places and it serves as a synthesis of the aspects and themes addressed during this festival. It had been a religious spectacle characterized by an elaborate performance and honoring important Mesoamerican deities. Furthermore, several cities and towns mentioned in the early colonial sources describing the rituals of Toxcatl used this ceremony to broadcast their communal identity and heritage within the multiethnic Aztec Empire through the involvement of local cults of patron deities. In the city of Tenochtitlan Toxcatl presented an opportunity to reaffirm the connection between the gods and the elected ruler, to define the nature of the ruler’s office and the legitimacy of his power. Moreover, the living image of Tezcatlipoca negotiated the concept of masculinity, gender roles and warrior’s prerogatives in the Aztec society during his year-long performance.

Tenochtitlan used the patterns of the well-known Mesoamerican calendar cycle to place itself in the wider cultural context of the Valley of Mexico; is it therefore possible that Toxcatl was part of a grand political and ideological scheme? If so, what was its intended target group and what were the reasons

behind the broadcast message? Who was the supposed recipient and how did his participation influence the performance itself?

Particular elements of the Toxcatl celebration should be analyzed within the context of the entire calendric system; each *veintena* was dedicated to a different deity of the Aztec pantheon. These “units” of the *xiuhpohualli* calendar complemented each other; their performances and rituals revealed a network of intricate relations between the actors and the audience - a sophisticated construction involving the message itself and its reception by the spectators.

Contemporary scholars tried various approaches to tackle the question of the meaning and significance of Toxcatl in the Aztec society. Usually they chose to focus on one selected aspect of the ceremony and they intended to bring most of the elements to one common denominator in order to find a satisfying explanation. Although these efforts provided the researchers with an abundant material for further analysis, they failed to reflect on the multifaceted and complex character of the ceremony, and they were determined to find one formula for a vast variety of aspects. Some of them state that Toxcatl marked the end of the dry season; others described it as performance dedicated to fertility cults.

A holistic approach would be more appropriate since eliminating other interpretations to pursue investigative agenda inevitably limits the spectrum of analysis. Instead of looking for one exclusive interpretation, a broader investigation should take place. The ceremony should be extensively inspected, taking into account its possible transformations and

modifications in time and place to serve various social purposes. It should certainly not be considered to be a static, histrionic ritual, but rather a performance that underwent considerable modifications since its introduction, and which adapted to changing social conditions.

This dissertation is an attempt on hermeneutical understanding and interpretation of primary sources (e.g.: post-Conquest chronicles written by Spaniards in the 16th-century colonial Mexico; native pictorial writing depicting Aztec religious ceremonies and its actors, etc.) in order to reveal the social context in which the rituals were constructed. It should provide the reader with tools to share the experience of the Toxcatl performance and help unlock the hidden messages in the texts, previously obscured by the bias of its authors or their political agendas (e.g.: evangelization of the native inhabitants on the conquered territories or eradicating the remnants of native beliefs in favor of the Christian faith).

This thesis relies heavily on the means provided by the discipline of ethnohistory, the study of cultures combining cross-disciplinary methods of historical document research and ethnographic studies such as anthropology, linguistics, and archaeology, in order to give a possibly complete picture of the entire Aztec culture. Ethnohistory employs maps, folklore, myth, oral traditions, music, and painting. Historical documents written by Spanish colonists and government officials give a biased and incomplete view on the native civilizations. Therefore it is necessary to employ native pictorial writings, paintings and sculpture to present their own point of view.

Archaeological evidence plays a significant part in this research: considering that the Toxcatl ceremony had been observed and described in various locations (e.g.: Tlatelolco, Tenochtitlan, Tepepulco and the Xochimilco area), the archaeological excavations and consequent findings on these sites help determine what type of urban settlement these places were and what was the predominant source of income in a given community. It will be further explained how these variables influence the character of the Toxcatl ceremony on site.

Taking into account that the number of archaeological findings is growing exponentially with every excavation being undertaken in the Basin of Mexico, to mention only the Templo Mayor project directed by Eduardo Matos Moctezuma and Leonardo López Luján, the state-of-the-art knowledge and understanding of Aztec culture is changing dynamically and opens new horizons of investigation. Such rapid progress offers fresh perspectives and reopens questions which were previously considered explained to some extent. The reinterpretation of texts in light of new archeological evidence would bring a substantial improvement to the state of Mesoamerican studies and therefore a holistic, hermeneutical approach is recommended in order to grasp the full extent of the matter.

2.0. Methodology

The first question to come up during an analysis of Toxcatl descriptions in 16th-century sources is the diversity of information: the ceremony apparently consisted of various elements which were not equally mentioned in every written or pictorial source. As a matter of fact, it appears that the

only element that appeared repeatedly was one of the Mesoamerican deities to which Toxcatl was dedicated - Tezcatlipoca.

16th-century Spanish-born missionaries, such as Bernardino de Sahagún and Diego Durán, took great interest in the Mesoamerican calendar and described in vivid detail its “months” and festivals, depicting the actors, the costumes, and the scenarios of each and every feast. Since information on the ritual calendar had been gathered by several different people in various places within the Valley of Mexico throughout the 16th and 17th century, its content includes different timeframes, alternative spelling of names, variations in calendric systems and a considerable amount of bias, propaganda and negative sentiment towards neighboring political entities.

These numerous variations have influenced modern understanding of the ceremonies to some extent. Even though the sources could not agree on such basic concept as the starting point of the month count in the Mesoamerican calendar, some renown 19th-century and contemporary scholars, who spent a great deal of time investigating the *xiuhpohualli* (e.g.: Eduard Seler, Burr Cartwright Brundage), assumed that Toxcatl conveyed the same meaning for all the inhabitants of the Valley of Mexico. They did not seem to consider the fact that the festival underwent many transformations since the introduction of the Mesoamerican calendar; Toxcatl could not have retained its original form and scenario since the ethnic composition of the Valley’s population changed dramatically. The powerful political center of Teotihuacan collapsed in mysterious circumstances, followed a couple of centuries later by the downfall of the

Toltec culture.² Splinter groups of the Toltec origin established new settlements which were subsequently conquered by wandering Chichimec tribes (The Tepanecs, the Texcocans, the Xochimilca, among others) around 1100 AD.³ The Mexica from Tenochtitlan managed to subjugate them all in the fourteenth century and together with Texcoco and Tlacopan created the so-called Aztec Empire. Therefore The Valley of Mexico was a melting pot of ethnic groups, languages and traditions; its inhabitants adapted to changing conditions and so did their cultures.⁴ Under such circumstances, it is highly unlikely that a religious ceremony such as Toxcatl had been celebrated in the same manner in every part of the Valley. It is also highly unlikely that it represented the same values for different groups.

An interesting question emerges after considering these facts: did Toxcatl have a constant, unchanging “core scenario”? The feast had been celebrated in various city-states (Nahuatl: *altepeme*) and regions – for example in Tenochtitlan, Tlatelolco, Texcoco, Tepepulco, Tlaxcala - and it was adapted

² Teotihuacan was a major urban center in the Basin of Mexico which dominated the area culturally and economically between 100 and 650 AD. It may have had more than 200,000 inhabitants and exercised significant influence in Mesoamerica.

The Toltec culture dominated in the Basin of Mexico between 800 and 1000 AD. It was centered in the capital of Tollan (or Tula, in the present-day Mexican state of Hidalgo).

³ The term Chichimecs is used to describe many different tribes with various ethnic backgrounds which were believed to arrive in the Valley of Mexico after the decline of the Toltec culture in the 12th century.

The Chichimecs spoke languages belonging predominantly to the Uto-Aztecan and Oto-Manguean groups. Originally wandering hunters-gatherers, the Chichimecs established permanent settlements in the Valley of Mexico and transformed into sedentary agricultural societies. Many tribes and city-states contemporary with the Mexica-Tenochca claimed Chichimec heritage, the most important among them being the Texcocans - members of the Aztec Triple Alliance.

The Mexica-Tenochca frequently used the term “Chichimec” to describe things considered primitive and barbaric, as opposed to the “culturally refined” Toltecs. However, they also portrayed the first rulers of Tenochtitlan as “Chichimec” because they considered them to be affiliated with the “wandering period” in their history.

⁴ Diehl 1989; Ixtlilxochitl 2008; Krickeberg 1964; López Austin 1973.

by various ethnic groups - both Nahua and non-Nahua peoples.⁵ Toxcatl must have conveyed different meaning for the inhabitants of the “center” and the “provinces”. Until now, most scholarly interpretations assumed that the variations in descriptions were caused by the researcher’s point of view, their editorial decisions and the provenience of their informants.

This last factor is a starting point for the innovative methodology of this dissertation. Its key methodological points are as follows:

1. The variations in the descriptions of Toxcatl in primary sources reflect on the fact that the local informants came from various communities.
2. Since these communities had diverse ethnic background and traditions, adopting the Mesoamerican calendar did not necessarily include the adaptation of its Aztec interpretation.
3. The variations reflect on the aspect of Toxcatl which was important to the given community, from which the informants originated.
4. These aspects reflect on the community’s different social and economic basis. Agrarian communities would focus on cultivation rites, whereas more urbanized entities would fix their attention on the political symbolism of Toxcatl and add themes like legitimization of power.
5. The ritual elements and the actors are counted and analyzed based on their occurrence in primary sources. The element with a higher

⁵ The Nahua are indigenous people of Mexico that speak various dialects of Nahuatl – a language belonging to the Uto-Aztecan group. Archaeological evidence indicates that they may have originated in what is now the southwestern part of the U.S.A. and the northwestern Mexico. The Nahua began their southwards migration around 500 CE and went to develop into some of the most important Mesoamerican cultures, for example the Aztecs and the Toltecs.

occurrence would be more likely to belong to the “core” of the festival, or its “common denominator”.

6. The informants’ origin is considered crucial: it indicates the character of the community (agrarian or urban), its ethnic background and possible syncretic influences on the Toxcatl performance and significance.
7. Toxcatl becomes a barometer of syncretism and multicultural character of the Aztec Empire, since its descriptions contain the biggest number of variations compared to other *veintenas* and reflect on the level of integration within the empire; it reflected the acceptance of the Aztec esthetic and philosophical code and on the community’s participation in the mainstream discourse.

3.0. Further research questions

The brilliant works of such prominent pioneers on Mesoamerican ethnology as Bernardino de Sahagún and Diego Durán provided this thesis with inspiration and encouraged extensive reinterpretation. The primary sources from the first phase of colonization of New Spain provide scholars with an intimate insight into the world of rapid social transformation, redefinition of basic cultural and religious concepts, not to mention the decline of a once-powerful state as a result of a violent military conquest.

Special interest will be taken in the process of cultural hybridization which took place in the 16th-century Valley of Mexico. An objective interpretation of provided data is of crucial importance: hidden agendas, prejudice,

intentions, and motivations of the colonial chroniclers should be taken into account and carefully analyzed.

An interesting conclusion can be reached after getting acquainted with the state-of-the-art interpretations of Toxcatl and other ceremonies from *xiuhpohualli*. The year-long performance of the divine representative of Tezcatlipoca on earth had been subjected to numerous analyses and subsequently many interesting concepts emerged. To mention only a few, David Carrasco's theory highlighted the significance of synesthesia in the Aztec ceremonies; Inga Clendinnen took special interest in erotic aspects of the divine impersonator's performance; Guilhem Olivier's suggested a link between the Aztec rulers and the cult of Tezcatlipoca. All of these theories influenced this dissertation and provided the author with inspiration for further research.

However, none of the aforementioned theories explained in full extent the purpose of the sacrificial death of Tezcatlipoca's representative. Since there are no known myths in which Tezcatlipoca's actually dies (Aztec or other), why did the young captive have to die in the culminating point of Toxcatl? Another question is: why did his performance last an entire year instead of a customary month? The divine impersonator should not be merely considered an avatar of the god and his direct representation, since his duty was not limited to "reflecting" the image of Tezcatlipoca: his death on the sacrificial stone had nothing to do with the re-enactment of a particular myth and transcended beyond pure "representation".

Contemporary interpretations of Toxcatl do not offer a satisfactory explanation of actual meaning of that particular human sacrifice; this dissertation proposes an explanation based on the holistic approach and tools used by symbolic anthropology and interdisciplinary performance studies. The purpose of this paper is to show that the representative of Tezcatlipoca described by Sahagún and Durán was not just believed to be his physical manifestation. He served as a platform for broadcasting various concepts; he was the epitome and the embodiment of those features and values which were highly appreciated in the Aztec society. In Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco the human representative of Tezcatlipoca served as a means of ideological propaganda directed specifically to young Aztec males.

It is therefore highly possible that the Toxcatl festival did not turn into a histrionic ritual devoid of any real significance. It could have played an important part in education, motivation and upbringing of the Aztec youth, offering boys and men a perfect role model of desirable virtues - an ideal of male conduct. According to Sahagún, the captive was carefully selected among his peers, based on his physical perfection. He was later trained by priest or stewards in courtly speech, dance and music in order to perform in palaces of Aztec nobility. Before and after his transformation he was the embodiment of almost every desirable masculine virtue, and he internalized various concepts, which were of great value in the Aztec society: beauty, elegance, harmony, cultural sophistication, musical skills, but also honor, courage, chivalry and dignity in face of impending death.

These qualities were of special significance to the Aztec state, considering that its foreign policy was based almost entirely on conquest and territorial expansion. Toxcatl could have served as a tool in education and encouragement of Aztec youths to pursue military career. Since the Triple Alliance didn't possess a regular stationary army, it depended entirely on constant supply of young men who were expected by the society to pursue a warrior career and undergo a long, rigorous training.⁶ Aztec males were put under a lot of pressure to fulfill cultural requirements and expectations attributed to their gender. An Aztec warrior was expected to be determined, motivated and - above all - fearless. Feast like Toxcatl could familiarize young people with the prospect of death – not only on the battlefield, but also as a sacrificial victim.

In the coming chapters the Aztec concept of death and ritual violence will be investigated in detail; suffice it to say, the fate of a sacrificial victim was not considered shameful. Tezcatlipoca's representative on earth was granted the honor of meeting his end at the hands of priests. Therefore, he was expected to act accordingly during such a prestigious occasion; Sahagún mentioned that during Toxcatl the young slave participated in the sacrifice of his own volition.⁷ Whether this assumption was substantiated, is not clear. The

⁶ The Aztec Triple Alliance had been initiated in 1428 by three city-states (*altepeme*) which had recently defeated the hegemony of Azcapotzalco: Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tlacopan. Established as a military treaty, the Triple Alliance quickly became a dominating player in the region and conquered vast territories, which became part of a complex tributary system. Tenochtitlan rose to prominence shortly after the foundation of this pact and subsequently became the *de facto* leader of the Triple Alliance.

Even though the founding members were theoretically considered to be equals, the ruler of Tenochtitlan assumed the title of the High Ruler (*huey tlatoani*) and in practice he was superior to the two remaining leaders of Texcoco and Tlacopan.

The Aztec forces of the Triple Alliance had been finally defeated by the Spanish troops of Hernán Cortés on 13 August 1521.

⁷ Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 73.

captive could have accepted his fate and face it with dignity, although the use of drugs in order to encourage and rid him of hesitation and fear could not be excluded.

4.0. Tezcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli

Two principal deities, to whom Toxcatl was dedicated, are subject to extensive research and academic publications. Huitzilopochtli, “The Hummingbird on the Left”, was a Postclassic invention; his representations in Mesoamerica are surprisingly scarce, which indicates that the deity was relatively young and his cult was not as widely popular or distributed as the Spanish 16th-century commentators implied.⁸ According to the Aztec myths, Huitzilopochtli was instrumental in the creation of the Cosmos; moreover, he led the Mexica from the mythical land of Aztlan and its seven caves Chicomoztoc to their island home of Tenochtitlan, and he brought them victory on the battlefield. One legend mentioned that Huitzilopochtli was one of four sons of the ancient creator couple Tonacatecuhtli and Tonacacihuatl (the other three brothers were Xipe, the Black Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl). It is said he was born with only bones and no flesh, that he was the smallest of the four brothers, and that his place lies on the Cosmos’ left side. After 600 year the divine parents told Huitzilopochtli and Quetzalcoatl to put the world in order; the brothers created the sun, the earth, the fire and the first pair of humans. Another story describes how he was miraculously born in full war regalia to the fierce goddess Coatlicue. His

⁸ In the Mesoamerican chronology the Postclassic Period extended between 1000 CE and 1697 CE. In the Valley of Mexico it was characterized by the emergence of the Toltec and Aztec cultures after the decline of the Teotihuacan culture. The Postclassic period ended with the Spanish conquest of the last independent native states in Mesoamerica.

first act was to destroy his sister Coyolxauhqui and his brothers the Centzonuitznaua, who went against their mother on Coatepec Mountain.⁹

Huitzilopochtli's ritual and iconographic imagery frequently linked him to the domains of governance and war. His trademark attire consisted of the blue-green hummingbird helmet and of white heron feathers attributed with Aztlan.¹⁰ He was often pictured carrying the instruments of war: a shield, darts and a fire-serpent drill (*xiuhcoatl*). Mexica legends recalled that during the early phase of their history Huitzilopochtli was carried in a bundle on the back of the ancestors wandering the land; like many Native American magical bundles, it probably contained Huitzilopochtli's image and other potent objects of his cult.

In the early stages of the construction of the Triple Alliance, Tenochtitlan elevated Huitzilopochtli's status to that of the patron deity of the Tenochca, as well as a solar deity. Unlike most other patron deities in Mesoamerica he

⁹ Brundage 1979

¹⁰ Aztlan (possible translations from Classic Nahuatl: "Place of Herons" or "Place of Whiteness") was a mythical ancestral home of several Nahuatl tribes which populated the Valley of Mexico in the sixteenth century.

According to their legends seven tribes which left seven caves of Chicomoztoc in Aztlan under the guidance of their respective tribal deities set out on a long journey which culminated in establishing new settlements in the Valley. Each cave represented a different Nahuatl-speaking group: the Xochimilca, the Tlahuica, the Acolhua, the Tlaxcalans, the Tepaneca, the Chalca and the Mexica.

For the latter the journey from Aztlan to Tenochtitlan became an important part of their future ideology and mythology – it represented all the hardships that the Mexica had to overcome in order to reach the land promised to them by their tribal god Huitzilopochtli. The establishment of Tenochtitlan marked the end of the wandering period in their collective history.

Several buildings and sacred locations in Tenochtitlan and its vicinity were thought to represent the mythical homeland of Aztlan; whether the place really existed and where it was located remains subject to scientific debate. The legend of the seven caves of Chicomoztoc was believed to represent and explain the ethnic plurality of the Valley of Mexico. See: Navarrete Linares 2011.

shared his main temple - the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan - with another deity, an ancient rain god Tlaloc.¹¹

Tezcatlipoca, “Smoking Mirror”, was a central deity in the Aztec pantheon; its figure goes as far back as the Olmec culture; similar deity appeared in the Maya pantheon as well.¹² The earliest material representations of this god were found in the Toltec Tollan (Tula), where he played the part of the biggest opponent of Quetzalcoatl; Tezcatlipoca starred in many legends, including the one referring to the fall of Quetzalcoatl and his subsequent journey to the Maya lands. Tezcatlipoca was frequently portrayed as a one-legged male with black and yellow stripes painted across his face, holding a mirror through which he was able to observe humans.

This particular god was believed to be omnipresent and omniscient; he possessed numerous attributes and he was known under many names, such as: Titlacauan (“We are his Slaves”), Necoc Yaotl (“Enemy of Both Sides”), Tloque Nahuaque (“Lord of the Near and the Nigh”), Yohualli Ehecatl (“Night, Wind”), and Ipalnemoani (“He By Whom We Live”) among others. His attributes included: political power, divination, youth, beauty, war, jaguars, owls, the night sky, hurricanes, discord and sorcery, to name only a few.¹³

In Aztec myths Tezcatlipoca joined forces with Quetzalcoatl in order to create the world; one of the legends tells how he lost his foot during a fight with the earth monster Cipactli and turned its cadaver into cultivated land. The

¹¹ Read and Gonzales 2000:193-195.

¹² The Olmec culture is generally considered to be the first major civilization in Mesoamerica. It emerged in the early Formative Period (around 1500 BCE) in the tropical lowlands of the present-day states of Tabasco and Veracruz, and it is believed to have declined around 400 BCE. Based on the archeological evidence it is said that the Olmecs introduced ritual ballgame and blood sacrifice in Mesoamerica.

¹³ Olivier 2004

number of stories featuring the deity implies that Tezcatlipoca was a significant figure and that his cult was widely distributed far beyond the Basin of Mexico.¹⁴

It seems that the Aztecs of Tenochtitlan appropriated this popular deity for their political goals, since Tezcatlipoca was associated with the power of the ruler in the Toltec times; in order to place themselves in the historical and ideological context, the Tenochca Aztecs incorporated the god into their rituals, beliefs and ceremonies, establishing a connection to the glorious era of Toltec dominance and implying that they were in fact heirs to the cultural and political heritage of Tollan.¹⁵

The Toxcatl festival in Tenochtitlan was connected to one specific identity of Tezcatlipoca – Titlacauan ("We are his Slaves"). In this incarnation Tezcatlipoca was represented as a young man with long black hair falling loose on his back; the illustration in the *Florentine Codex* depicts him wearing only a loincloth, sandals and a mantle made of knitted ropes.¹⁶ Titlacauan reflected on the less warrior-like aspect of Tezcatlipoca although in the myths he was known to have engaged in trickery and deceit. Certain modern commentators see him as a more "generic" equivalent of Tezcatlipoca, closer to common people than the omniscient and omnipotent deity usually associated with rulers and the creation of the universe.¹⁷ Probably because of this particular quality - being "generic" - Tezcatlipoca-Titlacauan had been represented during Toxcatl – he was expected to spend

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ For more comprehensive information on the cult of Tezcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli see: Olivier 2004 and Brundage 1979.

¹⁶ Sahagún 1950-1982: I: figure 38.

¹⁷ Sigal 2007: 34 (see: footnote 59).

the last year of his life in Tenochtitlan, close to his followers, and to enable the people to personally experience contact with the sphere of the divine.

5.0. *Ixiptla*

The concept of *ixiptla* is crucial to understanding Aztec ritual. Sahagún's description of Toxcatl mentions the divine representative on many occasions referring to him as *ixiptla*; the word itself comes from Nahuatl and seems to have been derived from *ixtli* – a word which in classic Nahuatl language signifies “face”.¹⁸ A similar term deriving from *ixtli* – *ixiptlayootl* – is translated as “image”.¹⁹

One of possible interpretations of the term suggests that *ixiptla* is a noun in its possessive form and it can be translated as “image” or “impersonator”.²⁰ It could also signify “likeness” or “deputy” since *ixiptla* was a man, a woman or a child chosen to be a known god and to act out his role in cult; he or she was widely accepted as the true but residual person of the deity.²¹ Such person was carefully selected based on its provenience and physical qualities; usually it was a slave purchased in the market or a war captive. After ritual cleansing the impersonator was dressed in the god's attire and ornaments and he was forced to appear in public and participate in religious rituals. His tenure always ended with a sacrificial death.²²

Burr Cartwright Brundage made an interesting point on the role of *ixiptla* in the Aztec religious sphere: an institution of god's image appearing among its

¹⁸ Molina 1977; De Wolf 2003.

¹⁹ De Wolf 2003: 431. In this particular example, „ii“ and „oo“ represent long vowels.

²⁰ Hvidtfeldt 1958: 78, 81.

²¹ Brundage 1985: 45.

²² Ibid.

people was a response to an extreme need to grasp the divine by detailed description and reiteration and thus it reduced the divine to a quality acceptable to all. The *ixiptla* served as an ordering device, enabling worshippers to focus their religious energies and, simultaneously, reducing the opportunities for ecstatic behavior. The reduction of divinity to a “clear visual packet” satisfied the curiosity and expectations of the worshippers. It also took the responsibility to stand *in loco dei* from the priests. The destruction of the *ixiptla* was seen as the consumption of the divine figure, whereas the god in his essence remained intact.²³

Alfredo López Austin described the nature and purpose of *teteo imixiptlahuan* (human images of gods) as following:

“[they are] men possessed by the gods, who, as such, died in a rite of renewal. The idea of a calendric cycle, of a periodic returning, in which the power of god was born, grew, decreased, and concluded made it necessary in a rite linking the time of man to mythical time that a god would die so his force might be reborn with new power. It was not men who died, but gods – gods within a corporeal covering that made possible their ritual death on earth. If the gods did not die, their force would diminish in a progressively aging process. Men destined for sacrifice were temporarily converted into receptacles of divine fire, they were treated as gods, and they were made to live as the deity lived in legend.”²⁴

A similar remark had been made by David Carrasco who also noted that seeing the divine image returning and traveling through the community provided the worshippers with a synesthesia of the senses; the visual experience simply triggered and organized it.²⁵

²³ Ibid., p. 46-47.

²⁴ López Austin 1988: I: 376-377.

²⁵ Carrasco 1999: 130-131.

Serge Gruzinski went further with his analysis of the *ixiptla* phenomenon: according to the scholar, *ixiptla* was the container for power, the localizable, epiphanic presence and the actualization of the power infused into an object; it emphasized the immanence of the forces surrounding people, whereas the Christian image (for example an icon or a statue) was meant to raise the worshippers in an upward motion, toward a personal god. Gruzinski compared the impersonator of Tezcatlipoca to “*the footprint left in the ground by the all-powerful god – a concave witness, a palpable and visible trace of divine invisibility – that reproduced the glyph signifying passage, displacement.*”²⁶

6.0. Terminology

A brief explanation of the nomenclature is necessary. The terms *Aztec*, *Mexica*, *Tenochca*, *Tlatelolca* and *Nahua*, are frequently used in this dissertation; for the purpose of this publication a categorization created by Eloise Quiñones Keber seems to be most appropriate and accurate.²⁷ The most commonly used term, *Aztec*, is the most recent since it was popularized by Alexander von Humboldt and William H. Prescott in the early 19th century. The word *Azteca* (people of Aztlan) describes several groups who migrated from the mythical homeland of Aztlan in the 12th century; authors generally refer to “Aztecs” while describing the inhabitants of the Aztec Empire before and after the Spanish conquest of New Spain.

²⁶ Gruzinski 2001: 51.

²⁷ Quiñones Keber 2002: 18-19.

The Aztec Empire itself consisted of the territory conquered and governed by the Triple Alliance, a confederation of three cities: Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tlacopan. *Mexica* refers to a particular group of Aztec migrants that established and settled in Mexico Tenochtitlan, Tlatelolco and other cities in the Basin of Mexico. The terms *Tenochca* and *Tlatelolca* refer to inhabitants of particular cities of the Triple Alliance. Therefore Mexica-Tenochca will also be used to refer to the inhabitants of Tenochtitlan. The term *Nahua* describes speakers of Nahuatl, the language which was widely used on the territories controlled by the Triple Alliance, and which continues to be spoken in Mexico today, although in modern dialects.

	Name of the month/festival	Date	Gods honored during the festival	Main theme of the festival
1.	Atlcahualo/ Xilomanaliztli	FEB 02 - FEB 21	The Tlalocs Chalchiuhtlicue Quetzalcoatl	water, rain, fertility
2.	Tlacaxipehualiztli	FEB 22 - MAR 13	Xipe Totec	spring, new vegetation, fertility
3.	Tozoztonli	MAR 14 - APR 02	Tlaloc Coatlicue	planting
4.	Huey Tozotli	APR 03 - APR 22	Cinteotl Chicomecoatl	young maize
5.	Toxcatl	APR 23 - MAY 12	Tezcatlipoca Huitzilopochtli	the beginning of the dry season
6.	Etzalcualiztli	MAY 13 - JUN 01	Tlaloc Quetzalcoatl Chalchiuhtlicue	end of dry season
7.	Tecuilhuitontli/ Tecuilhuitontli	JUN 02 - JUN 21	Uixtocihuatl Xochipilli	salt
8.	Huey Tecuilhuitl	JUN 22 - JUL 11	Xilonen	maize
9.	Tlaxochimaco	JUL 12 - JUL 31	Huitzilopochtli	flowers, trade, merchants
10.	Xocotl Huetzi	AUG01 - AUG 20	Huehuetotl, Xiuhtecuhtli	fire, harvest, feast of the dead
11.	Ochpaniztli	AUG 21 - SEPT 09	Tlazolteotl, Toci, Teteo Innan, Coatlicue, Cinteotl	ritual cleansing, harvest
12.	Teotleco	SEPT10 - SEPT 29	all deities	arrival of the gods
13.	Tepeilhuitl	SEPT 30 - OCT 19	Xochiquetzal, The Tlalocs, Trade Gods	mountains
14.	Quecholli	OCT 20 - NOV 8	Mixcoatl	hunting
15.	Panquetzaliztli	NOV 09 - NOV 28	Huitzilopochtli Tezcatlipoca	the birth of Huitzilopochtli
16.	Atemoztli	NOV 29 - DEC 18	the Tlalocs	rain
17.	Tititl	DEC 19 - JAN 07	Cihuacoatl	senior citizens
18.	Izcalli	JAN 08 - JAN 27	Tlaloc, Xiuhtecuhtli	rebirth, water, fire

Table 1: Eighteen “months” of the *xiuhpohualli* calendar in Tenochtitlan (according to Bernardino de Sahagún).

CHAPTER 2

TOXCATL IN SIXTEENTH- AND SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY SOURCES

1.0. Foreword to the description on primary sources

The following chapter deals with the 16th- and 17th-century sources in which the information on Toxcatl can be found. Although a number of codices and post-Conquest manuscripts described the Aztec *veintenas* and the ceremonies accompanying them, few of them provide the reader with valuable information on Toxcatl extending beyond a short mention of its occurrence, date and the deity to which it was dedicated.

To avoid unnecessary repetitions, this publication focuses on a few selected works: whenever the source's author replicated parts of other known works in his manuscript without contributing new, innovative data to the pool, his legacy will be mentioned in brief, quoting his source and references. A typical example of such practice can be found in manuscripts based on the now-lost *Crónica X*: their content and structure are almost identical; therefore analyzing them separately and in detail bears little scientific value for the purpose of this dissertation.

Bibliographical notes on the authors and the emergence of the manuscripts are added whenever possible. In a number of cases, the author of the pictorial source remained anonymous due to the colonial negligence in bibliographic description and reference; it was always the case with the

native codex painters. The same problem applies to the origin of informants, who provided the scholars with ethnographic data: usually they were not mentioned by their names in the manuscripts, and were referred to as a “group of local inhabitants” instead of a single person.

An important explanation should be made before these primary sources are analyzed. Since the emergence of the discipline of pre-Columbian studies the scholars investigating Aztec religion and rituals have been facing the same problem, which could potentially challenge their methodology, not to mention the significance of their theories and discoveries: there are no known pre-conquest descriptions of Aztec religious festivals - archeological, iconographic, or other. Whether they are yet to be found is an open question; in the meantime, the entire field of Aztec study is forced to depend on early colonial sources (both written and iconographic). Since there are no representations of Aztec festivals predating the Spanish conquest of Mexico, scholars base their theories on the information provided mostly by Spanish conquistadores, missionaries, and subjects of the Kingdom of New Spain, some of them anonymous.

In consequence, the 16th- and 17th-century sources on Aztec religion reveal various degrees of European influence: they were written in the transcultural environment of the new Spanish colony and were frequently used as a weapon of propaganda and deliberate misinformation in the war that Christianity declared on Native American beliefs and customs. They reflect on the general worldview, fantasies, stereotypes and prejudice of their authors, all of whom belonged to and lived in the hybrid culture shaping

early colonial Mexico. A scholar investigating this period in history should always be aware of the fact that his ethnohistorical sources usually served a certain political or ideological purpose while pretending to merely “reflect” on the past. These sources, often prepared under careful tutelage of Spanish monks, copied pre-Columbian stylistic patterns and claimed to be the facsimile of the original, long lost “native paintings” or to be prepared in consultation with the “native informants”. Since it is impossible to ascertain whether these manuscripts were faithful copies of the lost original, not to mention confirming the identity or provenience of the aforementioned informants, these sources should be handled with a considerable amount of skepticism and wariness.

The manuscripts and illustrations depicting Toxcatl were also vulnerable to misinformation and hyperbole, since they referred to the sensitive subject: native religion and customs. The Catholic Church carried on with its missionary work in Mexico in a manner reminding of a military campaign; presenting native religion and tradition in a very unflattering light was a vital part of this strategy. In the missionary propaganda, Catholicism was presented as a beacon of civilization, progress and order, as opposed to the allegedly brutal and barbaric religious practices of the “idol-worshipping Aztecs”.

The following subchapters analyze the content and bibliographic background of the selected sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sources describing Toxcatl; a careful examination of the author’s agenda and attitude toward Aztec beliefs is a crucial part of this analysis. Provided that the author’s

name and origin is known, and given that most of them were Spanish friars, a brief introduction to their personal beliefs presented in their writings and the attitude toward indigenous culture and religion is in order; the agenda behind the manuscript's preparation is crucial in deciphering the information correctly and in separating facts from bias.

Since the majority of contemporary scholars considered the Aztec religion to be pagan, blasphemous and saw it as a mockery of Christian faith, their sentiments directly influenced the content of their works, resulting with deliberate omission of certain facts, subjective interpretation of the data provided by the informants and finally the selection and edition of the aforementioned data in a manuscript. Special attention will be paid to the works of Bernardino de Sahagún due to the fact that they are generally considered to be one of the principal sources of information on the Aztec religion, including the Toxcatl festival. His descriptions of Aztec rituals, as detailed and elaborate as they are, reveal several methodological inaccuracies which have to be discussed in detail.

The sequence of primary sources, which are mentioned below, intends to follow a chronologic pattern; it is not absolutely accurate, given the dates of completion are not always confirmed. The pictorial documents are taken into account as first.

2.0. Codex Magliabechiano

A short page note in the richly illustrated *Codex Magliabechiano* provides basic information on Toxcatl. The so-called Magliabechiano Group is a

collection of codices, which were copied from an original manuscript, now lost. The prototype had been ordered sometime between 1529 and 1553 by an unknown Christian missionary in Mexico and had been prepared by native artist in a pre-Conquest style; it included images of eighteen monthly feasts and two moveable feasts, native deities, rites and customs, the count of twenty days, the fifty-two-year calendric cycle and ritual attires. The friar wrote annotations in Spanish to almost all of the illustrations. The prototype is believed to be one of the first attempts to record native religion and calendar, possibly predating Sahagún's chronicle by a couple of years.²⁸ Although the original manuscript was lost, its copies help make a general impression on its content and nature.

The group consists of: *Libro de Figuras* (1529-1553), *Códice Tudela* (c.1553), *Codex Magliabechiano* (mid 16th century), *Crónica* (c. 1558), *Costumbres* (second half of the 16th century), *Codex Ixtlilxochitl* (c. 1600), *Fiesta de los Indios* (before 1737), vignettes to the *Historia general de los hechos de los Castellanos en las Islas i Tierra Firme del Mar Oceano* written by Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas, and the *Codex Veytia* (1755).²⁹ The name of the group comes from Antonio Marco Magliabechi, a 17th-century Florentine bibliophile and a collector of antiquities.³⁰

According to the month count on which most of the codices in the Magliabechiano group agree, Toxcatl was the fifth *veintena* of the *xiuhpohualli* and it began on May 20. An English translation of the note is as follows:

²⁸ Boone 1983: 4-5.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 7.

This is the feast that the Indians called Toxcatl, the accent on the last [syllable]. It was a great feast because the demon who was celebrated during it was called Tezcatlipoca, which means smoking mirror. He was the foremost of the major gods that they revered, called by another name Titlacahuan, which means of whom we are slaves. And to the latter they attributed the dances and songs and flowers and the wearing of lip plugs and feathers, which is the thing that they esteemed most. In this feast they cut their tongues and gave the meat of them to the demon. And they made tamales from amaranth seed and corn, which they called body of their god. And these tamales they ate with a great feast”.³¹

The similar illustrations accompanying the note in the *Codex Magliabechiano* and *Codex Ixtlilxochitl* present only Tezcatlipoca; there is no image of the ceremony. The deity wears a headdress with an ornament made of two feathers hanging from a small red disc.³²

3.0. Codex Borbonicus

The *Codex Borbonicus*, an anonymous 16th century pictorial screenfold, depicts the Aztec religious ceremonies through a series of colorful drawings, which are accompanied by handwritten comments in Spanish.³³ Some scholars argued that the codex itself is merely an illustration to a written, now lost relation. Others explained that the “native” painting style of the images indicates another type of a narrative, which expressed concept solely through images and which would be characteristic for original pre-conquest Aztec sources.³⁴ The latter argument seems to be more plausible: the *Codex Borbonicus* efficiently provides the reader with very specific and extensive

³¹ Ibid., p. 193-194.

³² *Codex Ixtlilxochitl* 1976: 96r; *Codex Magliabechiano* 1970: 33r.

³³ The codex was named after the place in which it is being stored: the library of the Palais Bourbon in Paris, the seat of the French National Assembly.

³⁴ Couch 1985: 38.

information without the use of written words. To further support that hypothesis, Elizabeth Boone pointed out several striking similarities between the style of the *Codex Borbonicus* and other Aztec manuscript paintings from the imperial period.³⁵ She also suggested that the written comments, authored most probably by at least two anonymous Spanish friars, were added to the illustrations to make them more understandable to the European reader.³⁶

The exact origin and age, as well as the authorship of the *Codex Borbonicus* remain unknown, although the majority of the experts agree that it had probably been created in central Mexico several years after the Spanish Conquest.³⁷ It is also possible that it is a faithful copy of the pre-Conquest original.³⁸ The unique style of the codex, showing a relatively low degree of “European influences”, could indicate that the *Codex Borbonicus* was one of the earliest sources on the Aztec calendar festivals written in the post-Conquest period. Therefore it could resemble the most the pre-Hispanic tradition of recording information.³⁹ Following this argumentation, Boone claimed that the so-called “European influences” (for example: relative naturalism, certain iconographic elements as well as the sense of proportion) could reflect an earlier, pre-Columbian artistic convention inspired by Aztec contemporaries rather than the Europeans.⁴⁰

³⁵ Boone 1996

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

³⁷ Anders, Jansen and Garcia, 1991: 27.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³⁹ Couch 1984: 91.

⁴⁰ Boone 1982: 153-168.

Although it had been originally assumed that the *Codex Borbonicus* depicts festivals in Tenochtitlan, most of the contemporary scholars agree that it actually refers to the Chinampaneca region on the southern banks of the Lake Texcoco.⁴¹ The first interpretations of the codex were based on its comparison to the early colonial relations written by Bernardino de Sahagún and Diego Durán – both of which generally described the religious ceremonies in Tenochtitlan. The differences between the depiction of sacral buildings in the *Codex Borbonicus* and those portrayed on the pages of the *Florentine Codex* were explained as a result of an erroneous glossary description in the former.⁴² However, frequent depictions and references to the Aztec deities traditionally affiliated with the region of the Chinampaneca lagoons (such as the rain god Tlaloc, his water goddess wife Chalchiuhtlicue, the patron of fishermen and the deity of lake Atlahua, and especially Cihuacoatl – the patron goddess of Xochimilco, the principal city of the Chinampaneca area, as well as of chinampa farmers) led the experts to the conclusion that the *Codex Borbonicus* had been created there, and not in Tenochtitlan.⁴³ The cult of Cihuacoatl probably originated in that area; her main temple was located on the small island called Tlillan near Xochimilco; after the forces of Tenochtitlan conquered this territory, its principal goddess was added to the victors' pantheon.⁴⁴

Nicholson and, subsequently, Couch further supported the aforementioned theory by pointing out that the *Codex Borbonicus* depicts agricultural activities and common people with particular and vivid detail, which could

⁴¹ Anders, Jansen and Garcia, 1991: 52.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 52-53

⁴⁴ Cordero Espinosa 2007.

indicate that the informants who provided information to the authors of this document (or even the authors themselves) were well familiar with life in the rural region. Both scholars suggested that the festival illustrations of both the solar calendar as well as the 260-day divinatory calendar in the *Codex Borbonicus* describe a place significantly smaller than Tenochtitlan.⁴⁵

The illustration depicting Toxcatl in the *Codex Borbonicus* represents four “living embodiments” of the following deities: Tezcatlipoca, Huitzilopochtli, Cihuacoatl and Atlahua. Coincidentally, in his description of Toxcatl Diego Durán noted that “*on this day there was a general invocation of the main gods: Huitzilopochtli and Tezcatlipoca, the Sun and the goddess Cihuacoatl*”.⁴⁶

A group of commoners can be observed in the illustration just above the four representatives of gods: they sit facing a person holding an incense burner. A similar-looking person stands in front of the gods, incensing in their direction.⁴⁷ Motolinía mentioned that the *veintena* Toxcatl, as well as others, is known in various provinces under alternative name – Tepopochhuiliztli or “incensing”.⁴⁸ The name also appears in the *Códice Tudela* from the Magliabechiano Group.⁴⁹ Incensing was a common practice during Aztec rituals and it played an important part in Toxcatl as well; Diego Durán also mentioned it in his description.⁵⁰ This particular ritual activity, as well as the Toxcatl ceremony depiction in the *Codex Borbonicus*, will be described in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

⁴⁵ Couch 1984; Nicholson 1974b.

⁴⁶ Durán 1971: 428

⁴⁷ *Códice Borbónico* 1979: 26.

⁴⁸ Motolinía 1971: 45.

⁴⁹ *Códice Tudela* 1980: pic.15.

⁵⁰ Durán 1971: 427.



Table 2: Page from the *Codex Borbonicus* with the depiction of Toxcatl.

4.0. Memoriales o libro de las Cosas de la Nueva España y de los naturales de ella

Franciscan missionary Toribio Paredes from Benavente (1482-1568) was among the first 12 friars sent by the Spanish Crown to New Spain in 1524. Because of his modest garments the natives called him *Motolinía*, which means “he who is poor” in Nahuatl. The friar spent the rest of his long life in this new colony and actively participated in the conversion and evangelization process that took place in the Valley of Mexico.

Motolinía’s missionary duties directed him to the Tlaxcala province, in which he spent six years. During that time he had the opportunity to investigate the religious beliefs and practices of the local native inhabitants. He compiled his knowledge in two manuscripts: *Historia de los indios de Nueva España* and *Memoriales o libro de las Cosas de la Nueva España y de los naturales de ella*. Although he was literally a pioneer in the field of Mesoamerican ethnography, his work had been unknown to the wider audience (with the exception of Motolinía’s fellow friars) until 1858, when Joaquín García Icazbalceta published the *Historia*. *Memoriales* had been first published in 1903.⁵¹

In his *Memoriales* Motolinía comprehensively described deities and practices of Tlaxcala, Huexotzinco and Cholula. These cities used to be powerful pre-Conquest political centers; they worshipped other principal gods than Tenochtitlan, Texcoco or Tlacopan. Tlaxcala venerated Camaxtli; Huexotzinco chose Mixcoatl as its patron deity. Both gods had been patrons

⁵¹ León-Portilla 1971: VII.

of hunting and had strong ties to the Chichimec tribes.⁵² After the fall of the Toltec empire Cholula became the main center of the cult of Quetzalcoatl cult; his temple in this city was built on top of the greatest pyramid ever raised in the Valley of Mexico, which base was bigger than that of the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan or even the Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacan.⁵³

Since none of these three cities worshipped Tezcatlipoca or Huitzilopochtli as their principal deities, the feasts dedicated to them were not celebrated as lavishly as they were in Tenochtitlan and its principalities. Motolinía mentioned Toxcatl as the fourth *veintena*, since his count based on Tlaxcallan calendar started with the month Tlacaxipehualiztli instead of Itzcalli.^{54 55}

Toxcatl, called *Toscla* in the *Memoriales*, is described briefly as follows:⁵⁶

(...) en este día bailaban todos, y tenían en medio hecha la figura de Tezcaclipuca de semilla que dice *guatl* y después la comían, y mataban a uno si le había de guerra, y si no, esclavo. En esta fiesta ofrecían tamales y bollos de *guatl* y en ellos hincados palos emplumados.⁵⁷

The sacrifice of a young man seems to be the key element of the feast. Motolinía noted that the victim was usually a war captive, although it was

⁵² Motolinía 1971: 70.

⁵³ Brundage 1979

⁵⁴ “The Feast of Flaying of Men”, the month dedicated to Xipe Totec, the deity of vegetation and agriculture.

⁵⁵ Motolinía 1971: 45.

⁵⁶ As it was mentioned in the previous subsection concerning the Codex Borbonicus, according to the friar some *veintenas* had alternative names in various provinces. Toxcatl was also known as Tepupochhuiliztli or Tepopochhuiliztli - the variation derives from differences between Nahuatl used in Tenochtitlan and Texcoco, the latter considered by the contemporaries as the literary standard.

⁵⁷ Motolinía 1971: 51-52.

Guatl is a variant of *huautli*, a highly valued amaranth grain used commonly in the Aztec times as a source of nourishment (Soule 1979).

not always the case: under unusual circumstances, when the war captive could not have been provided for the ceremony, a regular slave had to be sacrificed instead.

5.0. Fray Bernardino de Sahagún

Bernardino de Sahagún (1499 –1590) was a Franciscan friar born in Spain. He crossed the Atlantic in 1529 and spent more than 50 years documenting Aztec beliefs and customs during his missionary work in the colonial New Spain. A pioneer in Mesoamerican ethnography, Fray Sahagún interviewed local highborn informants, predominantly in Tlatelolco and Tepepulco about their religious and ritual system, history, customs and natural environment. One of his numerous written works, including revised and edited versions of his previous writings, is the *General History*. It consists of twelve books, each devoted to different topic. *Book II: The Ceremonies* contains a detailed description of the Toxcatl festival.

This groundbreaking work bears evidence of a conflict between Sahagún's ethnographic passion and his religious vocation. Indigenous ritual practices, their complexity, sumptuousness and elaboration remained flagrant examples of idolatry in the eyes of this Catholic friar. His appreciation of native cultural sophistication collided with the resentment of ritual violence. In the eyes of a European monk the practice of human sacrifice proved that the Aztec religion was barbaric and pagan, no matter how elaborate. Ritual bloodshed placed the Aztecs in the realm of heresy and blasphemy; a nation so keen on violence and demonstrating such blatant disregard for human life seemed like a mockery of advanced civilization in the eyes of the friar.

Another problematic aspect of Sahagún's work is the provenance of his informants. The bulk of the data on culture, religion and history of Tenochtitlan stems from the interviews with the inhabitants of Tlatelolco. This Aztec city-state was populated by Nahuatl speakers who were also part of the Mexica ethnic group. However, in the course of their history, they frequently clashed with their powerful neighbor, Tenochtitlan. After the foundation of Tenochtitlan, they declared independence and chose their own *tlatoani*; the ruling house of Tlatelolco had close ties to the Tepanecs of Azcapotzalco, while Tenochtitlan chose to ally itself with neo-Toltec Culhuacan.⁵⁸ In 1473 Tlatelolco was forcibly subjugated and incorporated to Tenochtitlan. Suffice to say, the Tlatelolco elites were less than sympathetic to their Tenochca counterparts. They never fully accepted foreign supremacy and proudly manifested their unique lineage and heritage in spite of loss of political independence. Sahagún's informants were members of this elite; it is not unsubstantial to presume that they presented Tenochca in the unflattering manner. Therefore one must be wary of the information offered by Sahagún's narrative since the informants were not objective.

⁵⁸ A *tlatoani* is a Nahuatl term designating a ruler. *Tlatoani* means virtually "he who speaks", also "he who commands the spokesperson of Tezcatlipoca on the mortal plane and enforcer of his will. The *tlatoani* was the supreme ruler, a military, civil, judicial, legislative and religious leader of his people (Sullivan 1980). The term and the function may have originated in the turbulent period of Mesoamerican history between the fall of the Toltec empire and the emergence of new organized political structures in the Basin of Mexico in the early fourteenth century.

López Austin (1973) claimed that the nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes that inhabited the region in that period were frequently led by charismatic leaders who claimed to communicate with their tutelary deities. These so-called "*hombres-dioses*" established themselves as speakers of the gods and enforcers of the divine will on earth; usually they also proclaimed themselves heirs to the Toltec heritage and the descendants of Quetzalcoatl. This pattern of charismatic leadership and claimed entitlement to the Toltec heritage had been later adapted by the Mexica-Tenochca, who intermarried with the royal house of the neo-Toltec Culhuacan and later themselves as the heirs to the Toltec legacy.

Other problem related to the provenience of Sahagún's informants stems from the fact that they remained anonymous: we do not possess any biographic information on these people. Even though Sahagún himself may have given a general impression that he collaborated with "elders" born before the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire, most of them was probably born in colonial New Spain – after the conquest. Thus, some of them could hardly be called "elders" while Sahagún's works were being written. Since it isn't known who these people were, it is impossible to judge whether they provided information based on their own observation and experience or merely repeated stories heard from someone else.

Moreover, Sahagún's anonymous informants had complex identities which exerted strong influence on the content of their stories; they were born in a place which underwent radical changes in the course of one person's lifetime. An entire empire had been wiped out. Foreigners from distant land colonized this part of the world and brought their own language, religion and customs with them. The so-called Aztec elite also underwent drastic transformations: they had been deprived of their original position and incorporated into an alien social hierarchy; their only chance to hold on to the vestiges of former prestige was to adapt entirely to the new reality and cooperate with the colonial government as well as the Church. This included changing their given names, accepting Christianity and abandoning their own religion, tradition, value system, and worldview. Nahuatl was no more the language of the court and the poets – Spanish took its place. The entire Aztec society underwent fundamental changes and acquired a transcultural, hybridized identity; many native inhabitants adapted to the new situation by

following the government and the Church in public, but holding on to their tradition in private.

Bearing in mind these peculiar circumstances in the 16th-century colonial Mexico, it is important to ask: what did Sahagún's informants identify with? Did they identify with their town, their home village or their tribe? Did they identify with the colonial government? What was their attitude towards Spaniards and mestizos? What was their social rank? Which group did they belong to? What was their agenda?

All these factors had a huge impact on the information that these people provided. Consequently, the stories they told were anything but objective. The informants' motivation behind telling these stories is unknown; one should not assume that indigenous inhabitants of the former Aztec Empire were always honest with Sahagún's assistants. It is impossible to guarantee that they spoke the truth without deliberate exaggeration or omission of important facts. Many sixteen-century missionaries who interviewed the native populace in colonial Mexico admitted that cooperation was sometimes difficult - if not downward problematic. Sometimes the local interviewees manipulated facts to avoid the risk of persecution by the Catholic clergy. Many informants feared questions about the pre-Conquest religion or rituals because they suspected that providing such information would equal admitting to heathen beliefs and practices. In such cases, they would rather hide the truth if it turned too dangerous to the community, especially since many of them did practice syncretism and remained faithful to their deities

after their conversion. Reader of Sahagún's writings should always be aware of that issue.

The last problem concerning Sahagún's methodology is his vague reference to Toxcatl as "the most important feast of all" in the *xiuhpohualli* calendar.⁵⁹ He did not explain this statement further. Moreover, he mentioned it only in the Spanish-language introduction to the second volume of the *Florentine Codex*; the Nahuatl version is missing this phrase. This confusion may have been caused by the author's tendency to look for parallels between Toxcatl and Christian Easter; the former was supposed to be celebrated shortly before Easter Sunday. Sahagún tended to compare these two events, probably in hope of proving that they had similar character: both celebrated rebirth and regeneration. However, he did not provide any additional evidence supporting the claim that Toxcatl enjoyed special status among the festivals. Therefore it is possible that it was a case of "wishful thinking" on his part. The omission of this statement in the Nahuatl version of the introduction could indicate that Sahagún wanted to convince his Spanish readers of the similarities between the Aztec religion and Christianity and generate more popular interest in the former.

5.1. *Primeros Memoriales*

Sahagún was commissioned by the Provincial of his order, Fray Francisco de Toral, to prepare a Nahuatl text on the native culture; the knowledge of Aztec religion and rituals was supposed to serve as an instruction for the missionaries and to facilitate the indoctrination of the natives into the

⁵⁹ Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 9.

Christian faith. Sahagún accumulated his ethnographic material during his 3-year-long stay in a Franciscan monastery in Tepepulco (in the present Mexican state of Hidalgo) and during his residence in the Colegio de Santa Cruz in Tlatelolco.⁶⁰ In Tepepulco, he recruited eight to twelve members of the local nobility which were historically and culturally affiliated with Texcoco, and interviewed them for more than two years on their religion, history, tradition and knowledge of medicine. He was assisted by four of his students from the Colegio, all of them trilingual (Spanish/Latin/Nahuatl). He repeated this process later in Tlatelolco and recalled that with the help of the local governor he was able to find:

(...) eight or ten leaders, selected from among all, very capable in their language and in their ancient customs. Cloistered in the College with them and with four or five students of the college, all trilingual, for a year or more, all I brought written from Tepepulco was amended, explained and expanded.⁶¹

The manuscript, titled later by Francisco del Paso y Troncoso as the *Primeros Memoriales*, was completed in 1561.⁶²

Chapter 1 of the *Primeros Memoriales*: “Rituals and gods” was based on information that Sahagún compiled in Tepepulco; it is widely agreed that his informants were predominantly inhabitants of this provincial city.⁶³ The descriptions of *veintenas* vary significantly from those compiled later in the *Florentine Codex* since Sahagún collected data from the informants in

⁶⁰ Nicholson 2002: 26.

Colegio de Santa Cruz in Tlatelolco, established by the Franciscan order in 1536, was the first European school of higher learning in the Americas. Its purpose was to educate sons of the Aztec elite and to prepare them for priesthood. The pupils were taught in Spanish, Latin and Nahuatl. Due to lack of funding and governmental support the school ceased to exist in the middle of the 17th century.

⁶¹ Nicholson 2002: 54.

⁶² Sullivan 1997: 4.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

Tlatelolco while working on the latter. Tepepulco was a populous Acolhua city remaining under strong influence of Tenochtitlan and Texcoco; its inhabitants were descendants of Chichimecs and possibly neo-Toltec Colhuaque settlers.⁶⁴ Even though Nahuatl was the main language used in the area, a considerable number of the inhabitants were native Otomi speakers.⁶⁵

The description of Toxcatl is rather brief when compared to the material gathered in the *Florentine Codex*. The text informs that during this *veintena* Tezcatlipoca and Yacatecuhtli (patron deity of merchants) were born – it may also signify that their images were fashioned for the purpose of celebration.⁶⁶

According to the source, no people were sacrificed during this feast; offerings were made instead and birds (most probably quails) were decapitated. Women brought sacrificial papers painted with liquid rubber (*teteuitl*) and they carried them dancing in the procession around the Temple of Tezcatlipoca; after completing one round they left the papers in the shrine. At night the masters of youth (*telpoch-achcacauhtin*) danced together with young men under their supervision; the dance was called “Toxcatl-Leap” (*toxcachochololoya*). Another dance, called “Winding In and Out”, accompanied by a song, was performed by women in Huitzilopochtli’s shrine;

⁶⁴ Acolhua people arrived in the Valley of Mexico most probably in the 12th century and went to constitute the Triple Alliance together with the Mexica from Tenochtitlan and the Tepanecs of Tlacopan. Acolhua capital Texcoco was believed to be “the cultural center” of the Aztec Empire.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

The Nahuatl term *Otomi* refers to a Mexican indigenous group which members identify themselves as Hñāhñu. The Otomis were probably the original inhabitants of the Valley of Mexico and the central Mexican altiplano; they were gradually marginalized by the Nahua peoples arriving from the north.

⁶⁶ Sahagún 1974: 31-32, Sullivan 1997: 58.

the women were adorned with popcorn necklaces. The feast was said to start on the twenty-seventh of April.⁶⁷



Table 3: Depiction of Toxcatl in the *Primeros Memoriales*.

⁶⁷ Sahagún 1974: 32; Sullivan 1997: 59.

The illustration presents the dancers as well as the deities: Yacatecuhtli is portrayed in the top right corner, in front of his temple, wearing a headdress with feathers and holding a staff and a shield; he faces a shrine of Tezcatlipoca, in front of which stand four women with painted sacrificial papers (Table 3). Tezcatlipoca himself is depicted under Yacatecuhtli in a small temple; the deity wears the headdress, holds a shield painted with circles (probably symbolizing the night sky) and a staff ended with a mirror. The image shows two shrines which are not specifically attributed to any deity, although one of them is certainly dedicated to Huitzilopochtli. The people on the picture are divided into five groups:

- 1) deities in their shrines (Tezcatlipoca and Yacatecuhtli),
- 2) four women holding sacrificial papers,
- 3) two dancing women adorned with popcorn necklaces,
- 4) three almost naked men, wearing priestly insignia; it had been suggested that they were sacrificial victims or high priests, although according to the textual description they were rather the young men under the supervision of *telpoch-achcacuhtin*,
- 5) four men wearing net mantles attributed to warriors, most probably the masters of youth - *telpoch-achcacuhtin*.⁶⁸

The most important information included in this description is the lack of human sacrifice during Toxcatl, at least in Tepepulco. Two conclusions could be drawn from this fact: first of all, human sacrifice and the presence of *ixiptla* may have been reserved only for the central cities of the Triple Alliance (Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tlacopan) where the main temples of

⁶⁸ Sahagún 1974: 33.

deities were situated and where high priests and rulers resided; in other cities the feast could have been focused on other aspects, such as dance, music, paper offerings or incensing.

Second possible explanation for the lack of mention of human sacrifice in the description may lie in the agenda of Sahagún's informants: there is no guarantee that the native inhabitants of Tepepulco answered the questions truthfully. They could have easily agreed between themselves on keeping their past sacrificial practices in secret. Therefore the sole fact that human sacrifice was not mentioned in the *Primeros Memoriales* does not necessarily mean it did not take place. On the other side, Aztec human sacrifice in general may have taken place less frequently than some scholars are suggesting.

5.2. The Florentine Codex

A comprehensive description of Toxcatl can be found in the second book of the *Florentine Codex*. The sixth and the twenty-fourth chapters are entirely dedicated to the “*feast and blood sacrifices made during all the days in the fifth month, which was called Toxcatl*”.⁶⁹

Fray Bernardino de Sahagún finalized his massive work on the *Historia General (Universal) de las Cosas de (la) Nueva España*, (*General History of the Things of New Spain*), known under the more popular title as the *Florentine Codex*, in 1569 in the convent of San Francisco in Mexico City. He reorganized, extended and divided into twelve chapters the material he

⁶⁹ Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 66.

gathered while working on the *Primeros Memoriales*. While preparing another copy of the revised manuscript, he allowed a group of Tenochca scribes to revise and expand the final version.

The description of the *veintenas* in the manuscript was most probably based on their course during the reign of Moctezuma II Xocoyotzin (1502-1520), also known under variant spellings as Montezuma, Moteuczoma or Motecuhzoma. The first reason for this idea results from the chronology: given that Sahagún gathered his data in the second half of the 16th century, the age of his “elderly” informants and eyewitnesses would only allow them to participate and recall in vivid detail the ceremonies performed while Moctezuma II Xocoyotzin was the *tlatoani* of Tenochtitlan. He was also the last Aztec ruler to organize and participate in religious festivals in their true form and extent. After the Spanish conquest all indigenous religious activities were effectively prohibited. The informants could not have obtained such intimate, detailed knowledge of the Aztec feasts solely from the oral tradition of their ancestors; some of the native interviewees clearly recalled the performance from participant/observer perspective, providing Sahagún with an elaborate depiction of dance, costumes and jewelry worn by the “actors”.

The second reason can be deduced from the Sahagún’s text: Sahagún frequently mentioned Moctezuma in the second book of the *Florentine Codex* and used his name interchangeably with the terms “ruler” and “*tlatoani*”.⁷⁰ Moctezuma was mentioned so frequently in the text, that it is logical to assume, that he participated in depicted ceremonies personally. Moreover, a

⁷⁰ Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 66, 68, 70-71.

theory that the ceremonies described by Sahagún in Book II of the *Florentine Codex* took place in Tenochtitlan where Moctezuma ruled as the *tlatoani*, is plausible, since none other ruler was mentioned by name.

The description of Toxcatl begins with the annotation that the celebration was dedicated to Tezcatlipoca's avatar Titlacauan.⁷¹ Tezcatlipoca is described there as "the god of the gods".⁷² A young man had been chosen from many for his impeccable beauty to be ritually sacrificed in honor of this particular deity. He had been specially trained for this purpose: for a year he mastered the art of elegant speech, of playing musical instruments and of singing; he lived in luxury and was treated with reverence and worship by the people he came across during his walks through the city. Twenty days before the sacrifice he was given four young women and was allowed to have sexual relations with them; moreover, the change of his status was reflected by the change in physical appearance – a haircut reserved for war captains and a warrior's attire.⁷³ Five days before scheduled sacrifice he attended numerous feasts, banquets and private parties in the houses of Aztec nobility, accompanied by his entourage, consisting of four women and eight personal guards. These "stewards" followed the man throughout the entire year. Four of them fasted for a year in order to prepare spiritually for this task. The remaining four were called "masters of youth".⁷⁴

On the final day the young man was taken to a place called Tlapitzauayan, where his women left him with the guards. He was transported to another

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 9.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 9.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 66.

location, a shrine on the top of a pyramid in a city of Tlacoachcalco. Sahagún reported that the future victim ascended the steps without any third-party assistance, symbolically breaking the flutes he used to play on each step of the pyramid. On the summit, he was laid down on a sacrificial stone and his heart was torn out from his chest. The body was carefully brought down to the foot of the pyramid, where it was later decapitated. The skull was placed on the skull-rack (*tzompantli*).⁷⁵

A more detailed description of Toxcatl is found in the twenty-fourth chapter of the same volume, where Sahagún mentions other accompanying ceremonies and provides more information on the sacrificial victim. He explains that the victim was in fact a Tezcatlipoca impersonator, chosen from a group of about ten carefully selected young war captives, guarded by *calpixques*, or the “majordomos of the provinces”.⁷⁶ The selection took place directly after the capture, probably already on the battlefield, and was based entirely on the physical appearance. What follows in the narrative is a broad and specified list of requirements, which is none other than a unique, comprehensive treaty on the Aztec canon of male beauty. A suitable candidate for the position of divine impersonator was expected to have an unblemished body and flawless face features. The subsequent enumeration takes nearly two pages and gives precise indications to the height, body stature, head shape and weight; the perfect exemplar possessed following features:

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 10.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 64.

[He was] like something smoothed, like a tomato, or like a pebble, as if hewn of wood. [He did] not [have] curly hair, [but] straight, long hair; [he had] no scabs, pustules, or boils on the forehead, nor skin growths on the forehead, nor [was he] large-headed, nor with the back of the head prominent; not of a head shaped like a carrying-net, nor with the sutures of the crown yet soft; not broad-headed, nor with a square head; not bald, nor with a bulbous forehead; not of swollen eyelids, nor enlarged ones; not with swollen cheeks; not of disfigured eyes or cheeks, nor with swollen face; not with cleft chin; not with a gross face, nor a downcast one; not flat-nosed nor with wide nostrils, nor with an arched, Roman nose nor a bulbous nose, nor bent nor twisted, nor crooked – but his nose should be well-placed, straight; not thick-lipped nor gross- nor big-lipped, nor with bowl-like ones, nor enlarged; neither one who stammered, nor [one who talked] as if his tongue were pierced for a ring; nor one with welts on his tongue; nor one who spoke a barbarous language, or spoke thickly, or lisped, or was dumb; nor buck-toothed, nor large-toothed or fang-toothed, nor of yellowed teeth, nor darkened, nor decayed – but his teeth were like seashells, well arrayed in order; his teeth were not shaped like bowls. Neither had he scarred eyes, nor poor vision, nor squinting eyes, nor scarified; not blinded, nor of small, seedlike eyes, nor angry-eyed, nor sunken, nor hollow, nor cuplike, nor stupid-looking, nor gouged, pierced, or wounded; nor had he a scarred neck, [like one which hath been] choked, nor one with lacerations, nor with double chin, nor with pocks on the neck. Not with protruding or long ears, nor with torpid neck, nor hunch-backed, nor stiff-necked, nor lacking one hand, nor wanting both hands, nor fat-fingered; not emaciated, nor fat, nor big-bellied, nor of prominent, hatched-shaped navel, nor of wrinkled stomach, nor shrunken stomach; not cringing; not of hatched-shaped buttocks; nor of flabby buttocks or thighs. He who was thus, without flaw, who had no [bodily] defects, who had no blemishes, no moles, who had no lacerations or wrinkles on his body, they then looked well that he be taught to blow the flute; that he might pipe and play his flute well; and that with it he hold his flowers and his smoking tube and blow and suck upon it, and smell [the flowers]. Thus he went bearing [his flute], his flowers, and his smoking tube together as he walked through the streets.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 64-65.

After the careful selection, the young man was being prepared and instructed on his duties in a home of a steward before he could make his first public appearance. The impersonator of Tlilacauan was supposed to embody elegance, grace and courtly manners. He was taught how to express himself eloquently, for oratory skills were highly appreciated among Aztec nobility: proficiency in the art of elegant speech signaled thorough, comprehensive education and membership in the higher ranks of the social strata. Musical education was another quintessential part of upbringing; therefore the young captive was expected to polish his flute-playing skills in order to perform on a proficient level.

The divine impersonator made his debut during Toxcatl, on the exact moment when his predecessor was sacrificed.⁷⁸ The cyclical nature of his performance helped maintain the belief that Tezcatlipoca was omnipresent and omniscient; his constant presence in Tenochtitlan, combined with his visibility and accessibility (through the impersonator, who walked freely through the streets of the city and could be heard and seen by the inhabitants at different hours of day or night) granted the followers with the experience of the contact with the sphere of *sacrum*.⁷⁹

As an official inauguration of his office, the young man was dressed and adorned by the *tlatoani* himself, who provided him with necessary accessories and jewelry. Therefore the ruler acknowledged the representative as Tezcatlipoca-Tlilacauan since “*he took him to be his beloved god*”.⁸⁰ The face of the captive was painted black and he was given golden shell ear

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 64.

⁷⁹ Brundage 1985: 48-50.

⁸⁰ Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 66.

pendants, ear plugs made of turquoise, a shell necklace and a breast ornament made of white seashells, a snail shell lip plug, a cord bag, golden bracelets covering his forearms, a cape of wide mesh with a fringe of brown cotton thread, costly breech clout, golden bells fastened to his legs and sandals adorned with ocelot skin ears.⁸¹ His long hair was let loose and fell freely on his back. The *ixiptla* was thus prepared to make his appearance in the city. During most of the year he made frequent walks, accompanied by his entourage, played the flute, smoked a pipe and smelled flowers. He was supposed to be seen and heard by the inhabitants of Tenochtitlan, in order to remind them of the divine presence. People treated him like a lord, begged favors, bowed before him in reverence and kissed the earth.

During his appearances among the common folk, the impersonator was frequently greeted with signs of adoration, reverence and penance. Sahagún mentions that “*before him the common people bowed in reverence and kissed the earth*”.⁸² This aspect - showing signs of penance and remorse - was elaborated on by Diego Durán and it will be discussed further. Moreover, it is clearly stated in the source that the *ixiptla* was expected to fast and maintain his slender figure.⁸³

After a year of constant presence and performance, the *ixiptla* was prepared for the Toxcatl ceremony. In the month of Huey Tozoztli he was “married” to four women, groomed similarly to the young man. They represented various goddesses as *ixiptla*: Xochiquetzal (patron of beauty, female sex power, motherhood and pregnancy), Xilonen (also known as Chicomecoatl, deity of

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 66-67.

⁸² Ibid., p. 66.

⁸³ Ibid.

maize and nourishment), Atlatonan (goddess of the lakeshore and patron of motherhood) and Uixtocihuatl (patron of salty waters and salt). All of these Mesoamerican female deities were strongly associated with fertility. The representative of Tezcatlipoca-Titlacauan was allowed to have sexual relations with these women for twenty days; they also accompanied him during his travels and social calls.

What happened to them after the sacrifice of *ixiptla* is not clear; none of the chronicles provided any information on their future fate. It is possible that these women volunteered for the position – there is no indication that they were forced to participate or were simply prostitutes; they could have been daughters of Aztec noble families as well, offered in order to associate the family with the divine representative and produce offspring with “divine ancestry”. The primary sources do not provide information on the fate of children who may have been the result of these unions.

In addition to being granted the privilege of sexual relations with women, the young captive underwent a radical transformation of appearance; twenty days before the scheduled sacrifice he removed the ornaments; his hair was cut short, except for a tuft on his forehead, knotted with a brown cotton thread and adorned with a forked heron ornament with single quetzal feathers.⁸⁴ It is implied, that this specific type of haircut was reserved for war captains – warriors who provided a minimum of four live war captives designated for sacrifice.⁸⁵ Therefore, the young man was transformed from

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 66.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

the embodiment of purity, beauty, moderation, elegance and youth to the symbol of sexual and social maturity: an experienced Aztec warrior.

Five days before the end of the month the *ixiptla* began the celebration with dance and music. His stewards gave food away to the people and granted them various favors.⁸⁶ During that time, the impersonator visited various sites in the Valley of Mexico. On the first day they sang and danced in a place called Tecanman, which seems to have been the name of a temple or other type of structure in the sacred precinct of Tenochtitlan devoted to the cult of the Fire God, Xiuhtecuhtli/Huehuetotl.⁸⁷ On the second day they performed in a private house of a keeper of an image of Tezcatlipoca-Titlacauan.⁸⁸ The following day they went to Tepetzinco, a location in the middle of the lagoon famous for its hot springs and frequented by Aztec nobility.

Finally, on the fourth day, the *ixiptla* arrived in Tepepulco.⁸⁹ After they performed on the last location, they embarked on a canoe and travelled to a place called Acaquilpan (Caualtepec), a site in Texcoco, a center of obsidian tool industry bordering the powerful Tlaxcala province and site of one of the flowery war battlefields.⁹⁰ The women, who until this moment kept the young

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 68.

⁸⁷ Sullivan 1997: 85.

⁸⁸ Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 68.

⁸⁹ Although the distance between present-day Tepepulco (Tepeapulco) and Tepetzinco is about 90 km and therefore it is hard to cover it on foot in mere 24 hours, it was possible in the 16th century because the lake system covered major part of the Valley of Mexico. The entourage of Tezcatlipoca-Titlacauan could have accessed Tepepulco in canoes, using the river which flew near Teotihuacan and Otumba. They could have reached Acaquilpan from Tepepulco in a similar fashion.

⁹⁰ Sullivan 1997: 5.

The so-called flowery wars (Nahuatl: *xochiyaolotl*) were most probably mock battles the armies of the Triple Alliance fought against its enemies: the city-states of Tlaxcala, Huexotzinco, Cholula and Atlixco. These battles gave warriors the chance to test themselves and spar, which could subsequently lead to elevating their social status and prestige

man entertained and tried to take his mind off the impending sacrifice, had to end their voyage there and return to Tenochtitlan. The representative of Titlacauan was from now on accompanied exclusively by the pages who volunteered to follow him on his last journey.

From Acaquilpan he travelled to a pyramid and a small temple of Tezcatlipoca in Tlacoachcalco. He ascended the steps alone and, according to Sahagún's informants, on his own free will.⁹¹ On each step he symbolically broke the flutes which he was playing the previous year. When he reached the summit, the priests seized him, spread him on the sacrificial stone and cut open his breast, plucking out his heart and offered it to the sun.⁹² Contrary to popular practice, his body had not been thrown down the steps of the pyramid but rather carefully taken down to be later decapitated, flayed and dismembered. The head was delivered to the skull rack (*tzompatli*).

Sahagún's interpretation of the sacrifice, dictated by his informants from Tepepulco was as follows:

And this betoketh our life on earth. For he who rejoiceth, who possesseth riches, who seeketh and coveteth our lord's sweetness, his gentleness – riches and prosperity – thus endeth in great misery. For it is said: "None come to an end here upon earth with happiness, riches and wealth."⁹³

While the divine representative travelled with his entourage to different locations, Tenochtitlan celebrated other part of Toxcatl and focused on the cult of Huitzilopochtli. His effigy was made of mesquite wood and covered

Flowery wars may have been used for capturing prisoners for sacrifice as well. For more information on the flowery wars see: Hassig 1992.

⁹¹ Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 68.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

with fish amaranth dough; the statue had been dressed in a sleeveless jacket with human bones painted on it and it was covered with a maguey fiber cape. It was also adorned with a paper crown decorated with feathers and a feather-made knife, painted blood-red and given yet another cape, this time made of precious colored feathers with a great golden disc in the center.⁹⁴ A heap of bones made of amaranth dough and covered with a mantle painted with skulls, palms of hands, hip bones, ribs, legs, the lower arm bones and the outlines of feet was placed at the feet of the statue. Another item presented to the effigy was a thick roll of white paper, supported and spread on ceremonial arrows.

When the figure was decorated, it was taken up by seasoned warriors, masters of youth and young men. The scroll was spread before him and carried during a procession accompanied with dance and music. The participants climbed the temple pyramid of Huitznahuac, carried the effigy to a platform and left it there in the presence of the officials, priests and guardians.⁹⁵

At sunset food offerings were given to the statue. People frequently made private offerings at home. Everyone was expected to sacrifice a quail, starting with Moctezuma, who beheaded the bird himself. The action was repeated by a priest and the gathered people.⁹⁶ The remains were cast toward the figure of Huitzilopochtli. The masters of youth gathered the quails up, roasted and seasoned them and gave the birds to Moctezuma, his princes, the warriors

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 69.

⁹⁵ Huitznahuac is a name of a cult place that had been found in many Aztec cities (Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, Azcapotzalco, and Otompan to name a few). It generally denoted the cardinal direction of South and was associated with Huitzilopochtli in Tenochtitlan.

⁹⁶ Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 70.

and the priests; this food was reserved for the echelons only. After the quail offering a large hearth was constructed; two types of incense were burned in the incense burner, offering the fire and the scent to the all the gods.⁹⁷

A significant part of the description is dedicated to traditional dance types. Sahagún recounts that young women painted their faces and decorated themselves with red feathers; they carried black sacrificial paper banners on canes. On the mark given by two masters of youth, they started dancing and leaping:

(...) dancing in the fashion of women. And the women were in the middle, holding their sacrificial banners in both hands. They danced and leapt about. And the priests also danced. It was called “the leap in the month of Toxcatl. (...)

And only in the tribal temples were those who beat the drums for them, seated upon the ground. They beat the upright drums; they sat beating gourd rattles; they sat rattling gourd rattles and beating turtle shells. And all the masters of the youths, the young seasoned warriors, and the youths were spread out, dancing elsewhere [a dance] called the serpent dance. And hence [they named what] was danced a serpent dance, because they moved back and forth, and from side to side, and met each other face to face. They went holding each other’s hands as they danced. And also a number of young women danced, having so vowed, a popcorn dance. As thick as tassels of maize were their popcorn garlands. And these they placed upon [the girls’] heads. (...)

And they were mingling with and among those who danced. Of these, it was said that they embraced, they embraced one; they embraced Uitzilopochtli. And these girls were very well guarded, that none might covet them, nor ravish them. And all who dance the serpent dance were well watched, that none might fall into covetousness. And if anyone were seen seducing one [of the girls], then the masters of the youths threw him to the ground. They dragged him; they stepped upon him as he lay stretched out; they trampled upon him. For

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 71.

he had committed a crime in the temple; for he had done a wrong. They said to him: “Verily, here penitence is done; here a feast is held.” And as night fell during the dance, so closed the day of feasting when the day ended.⁹⁸

The friar deliberately described a non-orgiastic character of the dance; whenever the Aztec youths were concerned, he underlined strict rules of modesty and celibacy applied to them. It seems he wished to avoid wrong interpretation by his future readers and took every precaution in order to present the Aztec society as one possessing a strict moral code whenever young people were concerned. In his texts, young Aztecs were under constant surveillance and were discouraged from disorderly conduct or any type of sexual transgression; those who disobeyed were swiftly and severely punished.

The last part of the chapter mentions another *ixiptla* who was sacrificed during Toxcatl. Sahagún depicts him under three names: Ixteucale Tlacauepan and Teicautzin.⁹⁹ He explains that the representative of Huitzilopochtli died on the very last day of Toxcatl, after the feast of the serpent dance:

(...) and his paper raiment was painted with black discs. On his paper crown were eagle feathers. His headdress hung in disorder. Upon the crown of his head rested a flint knife made of red feathers. And also he had his network cape; over it hung a small net bag; and his [ornament like a priest's] maniple hung from his arm. It was of the skin of a wild beast.

⁹⁸ Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 71-73.

⁹⁹ According to Torquemada the name *Ixteucale* signifies: “Ojos del Señor de la Casa Divina, ò del Señor Divino de la Casa” (Torquemada 1969: 256). *Tlacauepan* - “Little Brother” was a name usually attributed to Huitzilopochtli, although it had been also suggested that it refers to his younger brother. Based on the fact that it was used alternately with other names which clearly refer to Huitzilopochtli, the author of this dissertation accepts the first interpretation and she will use the term Ixteucale-Tlacauepan in order to refer to the *ixiptla* of Huitzilopochtli participating in the Toxcatl festival.

He fastened shells [to his legs]. He danced with the others; he danced the serpent dance. He went first in line guiding the others. And purely of his free will, when he wished, he would die. When he wished, then he delivered himself to the place where he would die. Priests called tlatlacanaualti seized him, stretched him out [on the sacrificial stone], held him, and cut open his breast. His heart they lifted up as an offering to the sun. And his head also they strung on the skull rack.

So he came to his end, even as Titlacauan, [whose head was] strung [on the skull rack]. And at this time, the priests cut the skin: with a stone knife they cut the skin of youths, young boys, and even small children lying in their cradles. Thus they cut the skin of their stomachs, their breasts, both upper arms, and [both] forearms. This was done only at the time of [the feast of] Toxcatl, when it ended, each year; [and] thus ended [the feast].¹⁰⁰

5.2.1. Illustrations depicting Toxcatl in the Florentine Codex

There are six illustrations depicting Toxcatl in the *Florentine Codex*.¹⁰¹ Although they are painted in European fashion, they resemble the pre-Conquest pictorial system in their convention: the images are easy to interpret, provided that the reader is familiar with several Aztec glyphs, since the artist tended to mix European and native stylistics, using Aztec symbols as a build-in commentary or explanation. The human body is presented with European accuracy and sense of proportion, although it is frequently positioned in a standardized manner, characteristic of Aztec art.

The illustrations can be divided into certain categories: three of them present the *ixiptla* in his elaborate headdress (Table 4):

¹⁰⁰ Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 73.

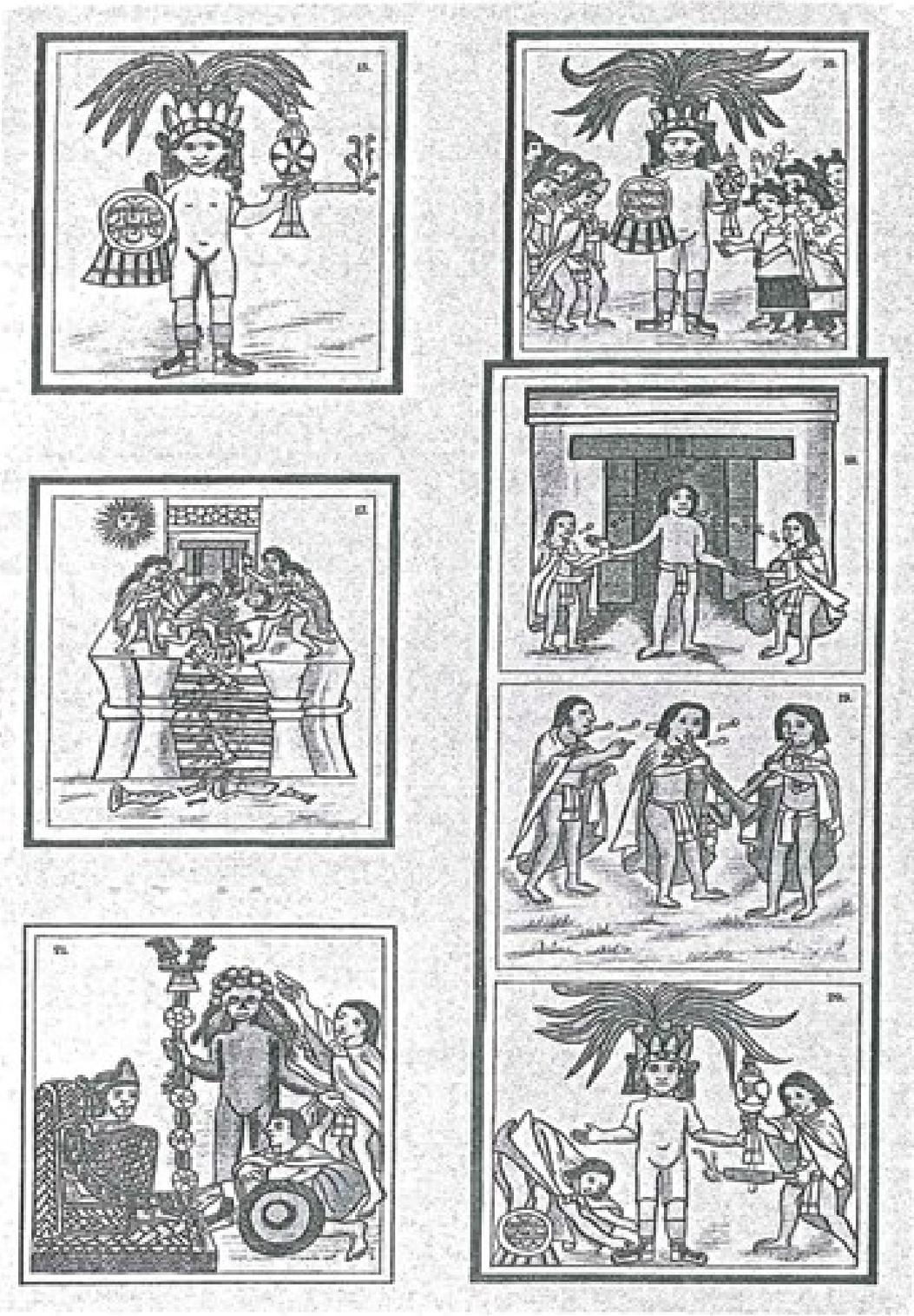
¹⁰¹ Sahagún 1950-1982: II: figures 15-20.

- 1) *ixiptla* is presented frontally, holding a shield, the staff with a mirror and a smoking pipe (p.15)
- 2) *ixiptla* in the same position and with the same attributes, surrounded by people (men on the left, women on the right), asking him to hear their pleas (p.16),
- 3) *ixiptla* being dressed and incensed by the servants (p.20).

Another two illustrations present him dressed in a simple loincloth:

- 1) talking to the servants while being fed and given a drink in front of a temple (most probably Tezcatlipoca's shrine); since the servant on the left is touching the impersonator's wrist, it could symbolize keeping the *ixiptla* fit for his duties and preventing him from gaining too much weight (p.18),
- 2) learning to play the flute from the servants (p.19).

The last image (Table 5) shows the moment of sacrifice: on top of a pyramid, in front of the temple, the impersonator is spread on the sacrificial stone; three priests hold his arms and legs while the fourth takes the heart out of his chest, which had been cut open with a knife. Broken flutes lay on the steps of the pyramid. The sacrifice is carried on in broad daylight, which is indicated by the sun in the top left corner.



—After Paso y Troncoso

Table 4: Depiction of Toxcatl in the *Florentine Codex*.

The image of Titlacauan is presented separately in Book I, dedicated to the Aztec gods; it pictures a young man wearing a colorful loincloth, simple sandals and a cape made of ropes.¹⁰² He is playing flute; in the left hand he carries flowers and a smoking pipe.

This series of pictures is the most comprehensive visual image of Toxcatl among the 16th-century sources. It depicts daily life of the representative, his activities, servants and worshippers. The illustrations present him in various attires, underlying his changing nature and the passage of time; they complement the text, offering a glimpse in the 16th-century visual aesthetics of the conquered Aztec Empire.

¹⁰² Sahagún 1950-1982: I: figure 38.

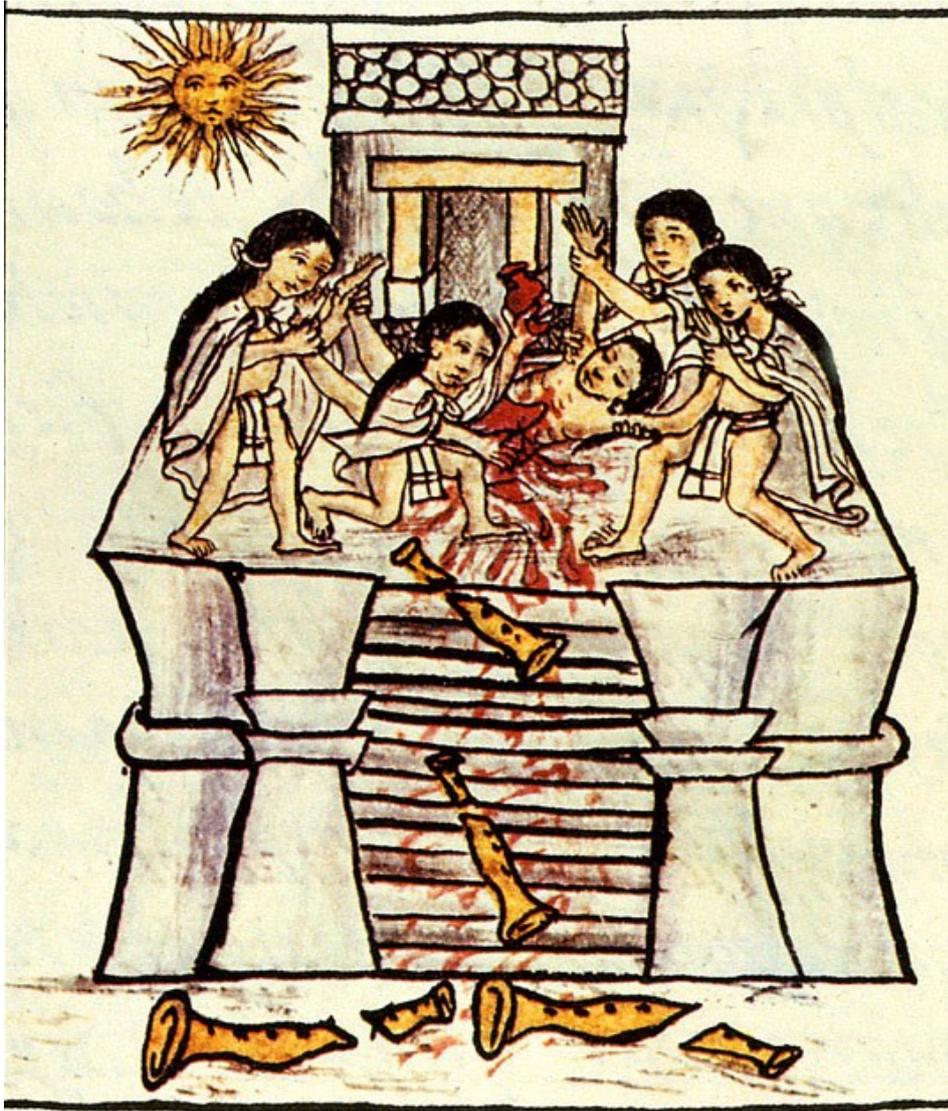


Table 5: Depiction of the Toxcatl sacrifice in the *Florentine Codex*.

6.0. Fray Diego Durán

Spanish-born Dominican friar Diego Durán (c. 1537–1588) came to the colony of New Spain as a child. He mastered the knowledge of Nahuatl and associated closely with Mexico, which helped him greatly during his investigation of native customs.¹⁰³ Aside from his missionary work in Oaxtepec and Hueyapan he frequently traveled to rural areas in order to interview the Nahuatl-speaking populace on Aztec culture, history and religion. His affiliation with Mexico, his great sympathy for its native inhabitants and his proficiency in the local language enabled him to gather information which would have been inaccessible to other researchers. Durán often criticized colonial administrators and clergy, who didn't take the effort to learn Nahuatl and he questioned the efficiency of such missionary work, stating that:

(...) they should know the language well and understand [the people] if they have any pretense of obtaining fruit... And [the ministers] should not acquiesce by saying that they know a little bit of the tongue in order to hear confession and that is enough.¹⁰⁴

Partly due to his stance the research he carried on received much criticism from his contemporaries. His ethnographic work included the descriptions of customs and rituals considered “heathen” by the Vatican. Describing them in such detail raised suspicions among Durán's supervisors. The friar insisted that his research helped document the cultural practices of the natives in order to prepare a manual on evangelization for future missionaries; the information he offered was supposed to facilitate their

¹⁰³ Durán 1994: xxvii.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

work.¹⁰⁵ The first edition of *The History of the Indies of New Spain* was published in Mexico City in 1581; *Book of the Gods and Rites*, which included a detailed description of Toxcatl, was written between 1574 and 1576. *The Ancient Calendar* was created around 1579.¹⁰⁶

Diego Durán's methodology raised many questions. Similarly to the case of Bernardino de Sahagún, there is very little known of the ethnic origin, social position or educational background of his informants. Durán traveled to rural regions in order to collect information and used Nahuatl to communicate with the local population; who these people were exactly and where they acquired their knowledge of Aztec customs is not described.¹⁰⁷ It is almost certain that they weren't inhabitants of Tenochtitlan.

There are some indications that these informants most likely did not belong to the social elite. Only an educated member of the nobility or a graduate of a priestly school (*calmecac*) could correctly interpret the symbolism and true meaning of the Aztec rituals. Some of Sahagún's informants clearly had access to this knowledge, whereas Durán's descriptions were mostly written from a viewer's perspective and did not provide a contextual analysis nor the interpretation of what "had been seen".

Furthermore, it is a fact that Durán gathered information on the Aztec religion and customs from former soldiers of the Spanish Crown; some of them personally participated in the conquest of Tenochtitlan. The relations they provided were clearly biased, and possibly highly exaggerated. A 16th-

¹⁰⁵ Durán 1994: xxviii.

¹⁰⁶ Durán 1971: 41.

¹⁰⁷ Durán 1994: xxvi.

century Spaniard who found himself in circumstances dramatically different from what he knew would definitely interpret foreign customs with a considerable prejudice, which would be based on his religious convictions, previous experiences, and personal beliefs. In the *History of the Indies of New Spain* Diego Durán frequently quoted his mentor in the Dominican Order, Fray Francisco de Aguilar, a former soldier under Hernán Cortés. That friar, who witnessed the Siege of Tenochtitlan, was a valuable source of first-hand information on Tenochca life and culture, although a very partisan one.

Durán's open contempt for human sacrifice and Aztec religious practices poses another problem; as a zealous Catholic he was unable to set aside his personal beliefs and convictions while describing practices of alleged ritual violence among the Aztecs. As a 16th-century Catholic friar he considered such actions barbaric, cruel and inhumane; he frequently expressed his disapproval for such activities in his chronicles. As a pioneer in ethnography as well as a missionary, Durán wasn't familiar with the principle of cultural relativism, which was established almost five hundred years later. He evaluated the acquired information with the cognitive tools he possessed as a man in that era. Consequently, he usually failed to analyze the phenomena in their true form and nature, instead describing them as he perceived them.

Fray Diego's personal agenda during his extensive research is also an interesting matter. This Dominican priest was deeply convinced that Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl, the hero-god of native history, was in fact the apostle Saint Thomas; Durán hypothesized that the people of Mexico were one of the

lost tribes of Israel.¹⁰⁸ He was not alone in his beliefs; this view had a rather considerable number of followers in 16th-century Europe. The discovery of advanced civilizations in Mexico and Peru raised a complicated question for the contemporary European philosophers: how could distant, previously unknown tribes achieve such high degree of cultural sophistication without contact with Judeo-Christian civilization? More importantly: how did they get familiar with the concept of a cultural hero-god, the Second Coming and the symbol of cross? Was it possible that someone tried to teach them the word of Christ before? This notion seemed plausible to Europeans since some of the rites the Aztecs practiced were strikingly similar to what the Spaniards already knew from their homeland, although the concept behind the rites appeared to them as rather deformed or perhaps misunderstood by “the natives”.

Fray Diego Durán was looking for evidence that Saint Thomas the Apostle crossed the Atlantic and taught the natives the principles of Christianity. The legends of Topiltzin-Quetzalcoatl bore many similarities to the Christian doctrine: a mysterious, mythological figure of a Toltec ruler Topiltzin left his people as a consequence of conspiracy against him and died shortly after.¹⁰⁹ Before he disappeared from the face of the earth, he foretold his return and a beginning of a new era, which in the eyes of Diego Durán was a clear reference to the Second Coming of Christ and Judgment Day.

The friar most probably confused the legends of two different figures – Topiltzin Ce Acatl, the mythical Toltec ruler and Quetzalcoatl, a popular

¹⁰⁸ Durán 1971: 230; Durán 1994: xxvii.

¹⁰⁹ Carrasco 2000: 30-31.

deity worshipped possibly as early as in the Late Preclassic Period (400 BC–600 CE) of Mesoamerican chronology. The latter was believed in the Postclassic Era (1000-1697 CE) to be a child of a virgin birth (among other versions of his origins) and according to the legends he died only to be reborn and come back to his people in the future.¹¹⁰ These stories must have seemed appealing to Durán. Therefore it may be assumed that the friar manipulated some facts in his chronicle in order to support his speculations.

6.1. Book of the Gods and Rites and The Ancient Calendar

The description of Toxcatl in the writings of Bernardino de Sahagún varies significantly from the one presented by Fray Diego Durán in his work *Book of the Gods and Rites*. The information provided by Durán sometimes contradicts Sahagún's version, especially when the dates and frequency of celebrations are considered. However, on many occasions it provides the reader with additional information and may be treated as complimentary to the description from the *Florentine Codex*.

Durán considers Toxcatl “*the most important and solemn feast, in which the most splendid ceremonies took place*”, surpassed in splendor and importance only by the feast dedicated to Huitzilopochtli.¹¹¹ Similarly to Bernardino de Sahagún, Durán clearly looked for parallels between Toxcatl and Easter Sunday; therefore he attributed special significance to this particular Aztec festival. As it was mentioned before, it was not the only case in which he searched for similarities between Christianity and the Aztec religion.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Durán 1971: 98.

Durán mentioned two functions of the Toxcatl festival: as a month of the *xiuhpohualli* calendar and as a ritual divination of Tezcatlipoca.¹¹² He mentioned that the important part of the celebration was dedicated to confession and penance. Tezcatlipoca was presented as a deity that listens to “*the prayers and requests of wretches and sinners*”.¹¹³ One of the illustrations showed the god wearing a golden band ending with a golden ear painted with fumes or puffs of smoke; it resembles a sign used by Nahuatl scribes to indicate speech.¹¹⁴

The image of Tezcatlipoca in the book pictured him with a fan adorned with a round plate of gold serving as a mirror. This attribute called *Itlachiayaque* (“Place from Which He Watches”) symbolized Tezcatlipoca’s omniscience and his ability to see all that took place in the world. The god is holding four arrows in his right hand – they may symbolize punishment for sins.¹¹⁵ Tezcatlipoca raised fear in the hearts of sinners, because they were afraid of exposing their transgressions.

Durán noted that Tezcatlipoca’s feast was celebrated every four years; during that time a general remission of sins took place, followed by ritual sacrifice of the divine impersonator.¹¹⁶ However, Sahagún stated in the *Florentine Codex* that Toxcatl was celebrated annually. Most probably Durán meant to describe the penitential aspect of Toxcatl as a special event that occurred in four-year intervals.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 99.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., Plate 8.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 99.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

The descriptions of Toxcatl in the *Florentine Codex* and the *Book of the Gods and Rites* differ significantly regarding the opening and closing dates of the festival. According to Bernardino de Sahagún, the count of the *xiuhpohualli* calendar started on February 2; given that each month consisted of twenty days, Toxcatl would be the fifth one, beginning on April 24 and ending on May 12.¹¹⁷ According to Durán Toxcatl began on May 20 and ended on June 8. This variation was caused mainly by the fact that both friars applied the dates differently to the Christian calendar.¹¹⁸

In the *Book of the Gods and Rites* Durán noted that the statue of Tezcatlipoca, which was usually hidden from the public eye in his shrine in Tenochtitlan, played a crucial part in the celebration: it had been ritually adorned with precious garments and ornaments because it displayed during the Toxcatl festival. In the same passage Durán also mentioned Titlacauan although he did not refer to him as the *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca.¹¹⁹ The passage goes as follows:

When the door [to Tezcatlipoca's temple] was cleared, a hierarch of the temple, entitled Titlacahuan, came out. He was dressed in the same clothes as the idol, carrying flowers in his hands and a small clay flute which gave forth a shrill sound. Turning to the east, the priest played the flute and, turning respectively to the west, north, and south, he did the same. After he had played the flute in the direction of the four parts of the world, all those present and those who were absent but who could hear him, placed a finger on the ground, smearing it with earth, whereupon they placed it within their mouths and ate the earth that stuck to their fingers. Then all prostrated themselves, weeping, invoking the darkness of the

¹¹⁷ Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 1.

¹¹⁸ For a comprehensive analysis of the differences in the count of Mesoamerican calendars see: Tichy 1981.

¹¹⁹ Durán referred to him as "Titlacahuan".

night and the wind, begging not to be forsaken, forgotten, or killed, begging that the labors of this life be alleviated.¹²⁰

According to Durán, *Titlacahuan* was an honorary title of the priest who directed the Toxcatl ceremony whereas Sahagún described him as the divine representative destined to be sacrificed. Perhaps this difference in the perception of Titlacahuan's function, seen the *Florentine Codex* and the *Book of the Gods and Rites*, is another indication to the provenience of the native informants that contributed to these two primary sources. It may appear that Bernardino de Sahagún's interviewees not only provided him with a more comprehensive description, but they were also able to explain the symbolical context of the rituals in question. In order to be able to do that, some of these informants must have received the type of education reserved for the upper strata of the Aztec society. Linguists would describe the Nahuatl culture as a "high context culture" because it operated based on the reception of many unspoken references and meanings. Only a narrow circle of people – well-educated Aztecs who received proper training in reading and decrypting those hidden messages - could grasp the full complexity of the ritual. The commoners without this training could only receive the ritual performance on the basic level – that of a viewer, not of an actor. It seems that this was often the case with Durán's informants, recalling the spectacle in vivid detail "as they saw it" but unable to offer a satisfying explanation of its true significance. Members of the "audience" could certainly misinterpret the role of Titlacahuan, since his ritual attire, dominating presence and fearsome attributes reminded them of high priests of Tezcatlipoca. Such

¹²⁰ Durán 1971: 101.

mistake could easily have resulted in calling the *ixiptla* “a hierarch of the temple”.¹²¹

Moreover, Durán wrote the *Book of the Gods and Rites* and the *Ancient Calendar* many years after Sahagún completed the *Florentine Codex*. His informants may have been considerably younger; most probably they were merely children during the Spanish Conquest and therefore could have not witnessed the indigenous religious ceremonies in person.

The initial part of the description of Toxcatl in the *Book of the Gods and Rites* is dedicated to the penitential feast occurring every four years. The “priest” of Tezcatlipoca was supposed to raise fear in the hearts of followers and remind them of the hardships of life; Tezcatlipoca possessed the power to bend fate to his caprice and will, to condemn mortals to suffering or to soothe their pain:

On hearing the notes of the flute, thieves, fornicators, murderers, and all other sinners were filled with fear and sadness. Some were so abashed that they could not conceal their having sinned and during all these days prayed that their transgressions remain unrevealed. In the midst of tearful and strange confusion and repentance they offered large quantities of incense to placate the god.¹²²

Tezcatlipoca was also the patron of war and warriors:

(...) On hearing the flute that day, brave and courageous men, all the old soldiers, implored the gods, in rare anguish and devotion, to be given victory against their enemies and strength to bring back many captives of war. These men prayed to the God of All Created

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Durán 1971: 101.

Things, to the Lord by Whom We Live, to the Sun, to Quetzalcoatl, to Tezcatlipoca, to Huitzilopochtli, and to Cihuacoatl – all of the principal divinities adored by the natives.¹²³

Durán noted that the festivities culminated ten days before the feast, which would indicate that by “feast” he meant the first day of the month:

During these days the man with the flute [Titlacauan] blew it in the four directions so that all would perform the rite of eating the earth and of begging the gods for the things they coveted. They prayed, lifting their eyes toward the heavens, sighing and moaning like people who are truly sorrowful for their faults and sins. Nevertheless, their sorrow was, in truth, simply because of fear of worldly punishment, to be administered to them, and not of chastisement after death, since they disclaimed knowledge of the perils of the afterlife. So it was that these people faced death without sorrow or fear. This is proved by the fact that on this day they prayed that their sins not be exposed.¹²⁴

The Dominican friar mentioned an interesting aspect of Aztec spirituality and morality which stood in blatant opposition to the principal rules of his own faith. Tezcatlipoca was not referred to as a merciful or forgiving god, nor was he supposed to grant pardon to sinners. The “confession” of sins did not lead to “cleaning the slate” and its purpose had nothing to do with the concept of the afterlife. The only fear in the hearts of the sinners was the fear of being exposed for their transgressions. According to their beliefs, Tezcatlipoca could guarantee them that their sins stayed hidden. Durán found it deeply disturbing that “the natives” were not interested in saving their immortal souls as he recalled that their only fear was:

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 101-102.

(...) of admitting or revealing their sins, even in confession. They are afraid that if they admit the truth they will receive some earthly harm or punishment, ignoring the afterlife as if it did not exist.¹²⁵

Durán understood such logic as general “weakness” of the indigenous population and therefore he appealed to the priests in charge of the evangelization not to apply severe punishment to the new converts. He recommended showing mercy and patience to help the newly-baptized natives get rid of their misconceptions and bad habits. Durán did not hesitate to point out with full honesty and severity that many members of the clergy committed “*sacrileges resulting from an exhibition of severity*” and suggested that the “*faults that I [Durán] have described should be judged as cases for the Inquisition, and ministers who behave in this manner should be suspended perpetually*”.¹²⁶ Fray Durán understood that what really mattered to these converts was the possible impact of their sins on their earthly existence – a severe and swift punishment (death penalty included) regulated by a strict moral code which organized their entire social life.

Durán’s special interest in the penitential aspect of Toxcatl could be explained by his passion for finding parallels between Christian and Aztec ritual calendars. It had already been mentioned that the Dominican friar believed in a connection between the legendary figure of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl and Saint Thomas the Apostle, who allegedly travelled to the Americas in order to spread the word of Christ. Durán was intrigued by apparent similarities between the timing and the character of annual Aztec

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 102.

¹²⁶ Durán 1971: 102

ceremonies and their Christian “counterparts”. In his writings he compared Easter to Tlacaxipehualiztli.¹²⁷ The day of Saint John the Baptist reminded him of the feast of Ochpaniztli and the feast of the Nativity of Our Lady were supposed to resemble the ceremonies of the goddess Chicomecoatl.¹²⁸ The Aztec honored their dead children and deceased adults “similarly” to All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day.¹²⁹ Durán mentioned that the Aztecs celebrated the descent of Huitzilopochtli to earth one day after Christmas.¹³⁰ Following this logic, Toxcatl, as observed every four years, bore striking similarities to the Rogation days, while its regular, annual course reminded Durán of Corpus Christi.¹³¹

The *Book of the Gods and Rites* includes a description of the annual celebration of Toxcatl, the calendric feast devoid of the special penitential aspect and including ritual dances followed by human sacrifice. Similarly to previous paragraphs in the aforementioned chapter, there are many variations in descriptions, some of them considerable. There was no mention of the origin of the divine impersonator or his special training. Durán did describe neither the physical requirements which the *ixiptla* had to fulfill nor the course of his duty (including travels, activities, and company). The four

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 225.

¹²⁸ Durán 1971: 449.

Ochpaniztli was the month of “cleansing rituals” dedicated to the goddess Toci.

¹²⁹ Durán 1971: 442.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 461-462.

¹³¹ Durán was not the only to notice this correlation. Colonial Church officials included the elements of the Toxcatl celebration in Amaquemecan (one of the cities constituting the Chalco province) in the festivities of Ash Wednesday, the cults of the Virgin of Guadalupe and of the Black Christ of Sacromonte.

The remnants of the Toxcatl festival can still be observed during the week of Ash Wednesday in Amaquemecan: local inhabitants clad in Aztec dress perform prehispanic rites and dance in front of the church raised on the ruins of Tezcatlipoca’s temple (López 1999: 124).

women assigned to the divine representative according to the *Florentine Codex*, were not mentioned in the *Book of the Gods and the Rites* at all.

Durán's version focused predominantly on the festivities accompanying the act of sacrifice rather than the sacrifice itself. In the *Florentine Codex* the *ixiptla* was pictured as the main actor and his ritual death was the culmination of a long and elaborate performance. Durán described the celebration as follows:

When the festivities of Tezcatlipoca arrived, all the people of the city gathered in the courtyard of the temple to celebrate the Feast of Toxcatl, which means Something Dry. It must be noted that the aim of the celebration was to petition rain, much like our own pleas and litanies which usually fall in the month of May.¹³²

Durán noted that the festivities began on May 9 and ended on May 19, contrary to the information provided by Sahagún, who stated that the main celebration took place during the last ten days of that Aztec month. To further complicate the matter, it also contradicted the information on Toxcatl that Durán provided in his work *The Ancient Calendar*, in which he stated:

The fifth month of the Mexica year fell upon May 20 according to our own calendar. On this first day of the month, just as on the first days of the other months, was held a solemn feast called Toxcatl.¹³³

It would mean that the culminating days of Toxcatl fell during the previous month called Huey Tozoztli. This confusion can be attributed to the fact, that Durán's native informants must have numbered hundreds and stemmed

¹³² Durán 1971: 426.

¹³³ Ibid.

from various cultural circles, ethnic groups and places.¹³⁴ Assuming that the calendars of Mesoamerican cities were not synchronized, such discrepancies should not be surprising.¹³⁵ Durán worked mostly alone on the accumulation and processing of his ethnographic data and could not enjoy the advantage of having his work revised, corrected, reedited and rewritten by multilingual native assistants. The *Florentine Codex* attributes its final version to the meticulous research and editorial work, which had been carefully revised by a group of specially elected “insiders”, whereas the first drafts of *The Book of Gods and Rites* and *The Ancient Calendar* circulated solely among the Dominican clerics.¹³⁶ Their content was a mixture of information provided by informants from various cities, villages, cultural backgrounds and ethnic groups and therefore it was bound to show many factual errors and inconsistencies, which do not diminish the appeal of these works or their merit to the field of Mexican ethnography.

There are numerous differences between the description of garments, ornaments and scheduled activities (dance, offerings, etc.) of the main Toxcatl actors found in the works of Durán and Sahagún. The most interesting one comes from a fact that Durán actually described the ceremony twice in the *Book of the Gods and Rites*: the first time when he referred to a feast dedicated to Huitzilopochtli, the second one in the chapter dealing with Tezcatlipoca. Durán did not name the ceremony of Huitzilopochtli; based on the description provided by the *Florentine Codex* it is fairly obvious that the depicted ritual is, at least partially, Toxcatl.

¹³⁴ Durán 1971: 40.

¹³⁵ It may result from the fact that these ritual calendars did not share a common starting point.

¹³⁶ Sahagún 1950-1982: I: 55. Durán 1971: 41-42.

Durán mentioned a historical event known as the Toxcatl Massacre in the chapter dedicated to Huitzilopochtli and his feast, clearly stating that it was the ceremony of Tenochtitlan's "supreme god".¹³⁷ The other ceremony, which was mentioned by name and was depicted in the following chapter, is indeed Toxcatl, but the text did not mention that this ceremonial month was dedicated to two deities: Huitzilopochtli and Tezcatlipoca. The information contained in the *Book of the Gods and Rites* is rather poorly organized: the facts frequently repeat or contradict themselves. A careful analysis of data, combined with cross-referencing it with suitable passages from the *Florentine Codex* will shed more light on this cryptic depiction.

The chapter dedicated to Huitzilopochtli begins with following sentences:

(...) the most solemn and celebrated feast in all the land (especially among the Tetzcocans and the Mexicas) was that of the god called Huitzilopochtli. Much is remarkable about this feast and its rites since it was a mixture of diverse ceremonies. Some resemble those of our Christian religion; others, things of the Old Testament.¹³⁸

The same was later said about Toxcatl, further confirmed by Sahagún who called Tezcatlipoca "*god of the gods*".¹³⁹ Contrary to this last statement, Durán claims that Huitzilopochtli was the principal deity among the Mexica:

The god we have described was feared and revered so intensely in the land that he was the only one called Lord of Created Things and The Almighty. To him were offered the greatest and most important sacrifices. His temple was the most outstanding in this land (...). Huitzilopochtli was a wooden statue carved in the image of a man seated upon a blue wooden bench in the fashion of a litter; from each corner there emerged a serpent-headed pole, long enough for a man to bear on his shoulder. This bench was sky blue, indicating

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 77-78.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 70.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 98. Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 9.

that Huitzilopochtli's abode was in heavens. The god's forehead was blue, and above his nose ran a blue band which reached from ear to ear. On his head he wore a rich headdress in the shape of a bird's beak. These birds were called *huitzitzilin*.¹⁴⁰

The description of the bench with serpent poles and the statue concurs with the image depicted by Sahagún on the second part of Toxcatl, the one taking place in Tenochtitlan and dedicated to Huitzilopochtli.¹⁴¹

The text paid much attention to the youth serving Huitzilopochtli. Durán mentioned two "monasteries" within the walls of the sacred precinct in Tenochtitlan; one was a place of seclusion, where boys between eighteen and twenty years of age "*lived in chastity, poverty and obedience*".¹⁴² Durán drew comparisons between these boys and young monks. He noted:

All these were under the care of captains or superiors. [The superiors] were called *telpochtlatoque*, which means "directors of young men". All lived with such chastity and modesty that when they came out into public places where there were women they kept their heads low and their eyes on the ground without daring to raise [their eyes to the women's faces]. (...)

These youths who lived in seclusion were called *elocuatecomame* (...) There were no more than fifty of these penitents. Their labor consisted of keeping the everlasting fire of the temple burning; bringing the wood which was to be burned; arranging branches and adorning the temple; rising at midnight to blow the shell trumpets to awaken the people; watching over the idol in his rooms at night so that the fire would not go out (...).

These [youths] were firmly controlled by their superiors and were very obedient. They never strayed in the slightest from the rules. (...)

¹⁴⁰ Durán 1971: 72.

¹⁴¹ Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 69.

¹⁴² Durán 1971: 81.

This penance and exercise lasted a full year, which was spent entirely in seclusion, mortification, and fasts and strange penitences. (...)

The second house (...) stood on the other side of the courtyard, in front of the first. This was a cloister for nuns, who lived in seclusion, all of them virgins between twelve and thirteen years of age. They were called Maidens of Penitence, and their life was exactly like that of the males. (..)

They lived with great decorum, and the strictness in which they were kept was so great that if some [maidens] or some [young men] were discovered in any transgression against chastity, no matter how slight, they were slain, without any mercy, accused of having offended their god and great lord.¹⁴³

The cloistered virgins were responsible for preparing the effigy of Huitzilopochtli for the Toxcatl festivities:

(...) two days before the feast of the god we are dealing with [they] ground a great quantity of amaranth seeds, called *huahtli*, together with toasted maize. When this had been ground, it was mixed with black maguey syrup. After it was kneaded, an idol was made of that dough – exactly like and as large as the wooden one I [Durán] have described. Green, blue, or white beads were inlaid as his eyes, and his teeth were grains of corn. (...)

When the [idol] had been finished, all the lords came, bringing a finely worked, rich costume (...). On it was placed the bird's beak of shining, burnished gold; the feather headdress on his head; his apron of plumes; his shield, staff, bracelets, and anklets, his splendid sandals; and his breechcloth, a magnificent piece of needlework and feathers. When he had been thus finely garbed and adorned, he was set upon a blue bench, similar to a litter, to which four handles were attached. (...)

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 82-84.

On the morning of the feast, an hour before dawn, all the girls came out dressed in white, wearing new shirts and skirts. On that day they were called the Sisters of Huitzilopochtli, that is to say, *Ipilhuan Huitzilopochtli*.¹⁴⁴

Both groups participated in the ceremony:

[The maidens] they came along crowned with garlands of toasted, burst corn, called *momochitl*. They wore thick garlands of this corn, and around their necks were big necklaces of the same, hanging under the left arm. Thus adorned, their red paint placed upon their cheeks, their arms feathered with red parrot plumes from the elbow to the wrist, they placed the litter upon their shoulders and carried it to the courtyard. The young men stood outside. All of them were covered with feathers, crowned with the maize garlands described and necklaces of the same around their necks. And as soon as the maidens appeared with the idol upon their shoulders, [the youths] approached with great reverence and set [the litter] upon their own. They carried it to the foot of the temple steps, whereupon all the people made a profound obeisance, touching earth on the ground and carrying it to their mouths. This ceremony was very common among these people at the main feasts of their divinities. After this rite was performed, all the people formed in the procession and with great swiftness made their way to the Hill of Chapultepec. There a second station was made. From Atlacuilhuayan [Tacubaya] they went to Coyoacan and, without pausing, returned to the City of Mexico. This journey was accomplished in three or four hours. The procession was called *Ipaina Huitzilopochtli*, which means the Swift, the Fleet Path of Huitzilopochtli.¹⁴⁵

Sahagún had not mentioned this procession in his writings; instead, he focused on the trips taken by the *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca Titlacauan, his guards and concubines.¹⁴⁶ Durán's description of the festival paid considerably less attention to the divine representative than the *Florentine Codex* did, focusing predominantly on the activities involving the effigies of Huitzilopochtli and Tezcatlipoca and those engaging the Aztec youth. One

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 86.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁴⁶ Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 70-71.

reason behind this particular choice could have been the obvious parallel between the Aztec “procession” and the Christian feast of Corpus Christi. Both celebrations include similar elements: the procession of devotees between chosen “stations, commemorating events from the deity’s personal mythology. A symbolic image of the deity (the statue of Huitzilopochtli and the Blessed Sacrament) were being carried by specially designated individuals (the cloistered young men and Catholic priests) on a platform (the serpent bench reminding Durán of a European litter). The entire description bears evidence of Durán’s diffusionist tendencies.

The final part of the description mentioned the events that took place after the return of the procession to Templo Mayor:

(...) when they reached the steps of the temple, the litter was set down. [Then] they took thick ropes and tied them to the handles of the litter (...). The litter with the idol was carried up to the pinnacle of the temple, in the midst of the sounding of trumpets and flutes, to the din of the shells and drums (...).

Once they had reached the top and had placed [the idol] in a flower-decked shelter made in the form of a bower, the youths then scattered flowers of many hues and kinds and covered the entire place with them (...).

After these things have been done, the maidens appeared in the finery I have described. From their convent they brought out some pieces of amaranth-seed dough (the same as that used in the making of the idol) in the form of large bones. These bones were given to the young men, who in turn carried them up and placed them at the feet of the god and [filled] the place with them until there was no room for more. (...) This dough shaped like bones was called “the bones and flesh of Huitzilopochtli”. (...)

When the bones had been placed there, the elders of the temple came out – priests, deacons, and all the other ministers and sacrificers according to their seniority (...). They came in

procession, wearing their multicolored, embroidered net mantles, according to their rank and office, with garlands on their heads and around their necks. Behind them emerged the gods and goddesses, [or rather] their impersonators, dressed in the proper garb of each deity. In an orderly fashion they formed around the pieces of dough. They performed a ceremony of chanting and dancing upon them. With this, [the dough] was considered blessed and consecrated as the flesh and bones of the god Huitzilopochtli.¹⁴⁷

The depiction of Toxcatl consisted of similar elements as the celebration dedicated exclusively to Huitzilopochtli. The author noted that:

(...) early on this solemn day [May 19] the ministers of the temple [of Tezcatlipoca] brought out a bier richly adorned with cloth of many colors – yellow, green, blue, and red. To this litter were attached as many handles as there were priests to carry it. These men were all smeared with black, and their hair was long. (...) The priests wore the same type of clothing as that worn by the idol. Upon the litter was carried the representative of the god, whom they called Likeness of the Divine Tezcatlipoca. There are two opinions regarding this matter: some say that it was the original wooden idol which usually stood upon the altar, while others believe that it was a live man who represented the deity upon the bier.¹⁴⁸

The author himself was convinced that the divine representative was a living man although in this particular paragraph he referred solely to the question of who or what was installed upon the bier in that very moment:

(...) having placed the litter on their shoulders, the priests brought it out to the steps of the temple. The youths and maidens who lived in seclusion were then brought forth, carrying a thick, twisted cord of roasted corn, with which they adorned the bier. Then they threw a string of this toasted corn around the neck of the idol and placed a garland of the same material upon its head. This string was called Toxcatl and indicated the barrenness and dryness of the season. The boys appeared smeared with soot; they wore net mantles, strings of toasted maize about their necks, and garlands of the same. The girls appeared in fine new

¹⁴⁷ Durán 1971: 87-89.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 102-103.

dresses - skirts, huipils, with strings of toasted maize about their necks, and on their heads tiaras made of twigs covered with the same maize. Their arms and legs were feathered with red plumes, and their cheeks were painted. Many necklaces of corn were then brought forth and were placed around the necks of the noblemen. Instead of candles they carried flowers in their hands (...).¹⁴⁹

The priests carried the litter around the courtyard of the temple and they were followed by a procession of devotees; they offered incense to the idol and raised their arms, praying and pleading the god for favor as the smoke of the incense rose to heaven. The gathered crowd prayed along; occasional penitential self-flagellation took place.

When the procession ended, the idol was returned to its chamber in the heart of the temple. People offered various items as payment for various favors they asked the gods during the previous year. Offerings included cloth, precious stones and incense, pine torches, ears of corn, and quail.¹⁵⁰

After the offering the people returned to their homes to dine. The temple maidens accompanied by the steward – probably the master of youth – displayed food prepared for the god on the first step of the pyramid. Since they were strictly forbidden to enter the shrine, the cloister boys took the food and brought it to the chambers of “dignitaries of the temple” called *calmeca teteuctin*. These men had remained separated from their wives and families for the previous five days, fasting and self-mutilating in order to please Tezcatlipoca. After they had been fed, the people started gathering again on the courtyard to witness the end of the feast. Durán wrote:

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 103.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 104.

The quail offering was also mentioned in the *Florentine Codex* – the birds were decapitated and cast bleeding at the foot of the altar.

(...) when everyone was present, a male slave was brought forth. This man had represented the god for one year, and was clothed, adorned, and honored as the deity himself. High reverence was paid to him, and then he was delivered to the sacrificers who appeared at the same time, decorated and dressed as I have already described. Four of the sacrificers seized the victim by the feet and the hands while the priest opened his chest and extracted his heart, raising it with his hand as high as he could, offering its steam to the sun. After a moment, about [the length of] an Ave Maria (during which it was held high), the heart was thrown toward the idol, and the cadaver was rolled down the steps. Tezcatlipoca was now dead.¹⁵¹

The festivities carried on after the sacrifice:

(...) the people then went to a place called Ixhuacan, consecrated to that purpose, and the youths and maidens, wearing the ornaments I have described, appeared, playing music. The dignitaries of the temple danced and sang, standing in an orderly fashion around the drum. And all the lords danced in a circle. Their garments and decorations were the same as those of the young people.¹⁵²

At sunset the young girls brought clay platters of *tzoalli*, dough mixed with honey and covered with cloths decorated with skulls and crossbones, and carried them to the entrance of the shrine. Subsequently, the boys brought them to the *calmecca teteuctin*; this time, however, they rushed to reach the top of the stairway in order to get there first. The first four boys were received by the dignitaries and elders of the temple with great honors. They were bathed, given fine ornaments “*and from that day on were respected and honored as men of renown*”.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 106-107.

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 107.

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 107-108.

As the feast of Toxcatl officially ended, so had the year-long service and seclusion of the young Aztecs:

As the girls left the place, all the boys from the different schools awaited them at the doorway of the courtyard, holding balls of sedge grass in their hands. The boys threw the balls at them and laughed at them, insinuating that since they had left the service of the gods they were free to do with their bodies as they wished.¹⁵⁴

The custom of ball throwing could have been connected to the myth of the origin of Huitzilopochtli. According to the legend, his mother, the goddess Coatlicue, became impregnated by a ball of feathers.¹⁵⁵ Young men waiting for the virgins to leave the sacred precinct could have thrown the balls in order to insinuate that the girls were now ready to become wives and mothers.

Additional information on the sacrificed representative of Tezcatlipoca can be found in another chapter of the *Book of the Gods and Rites*. Durán mentioned him briefly in the chapter dedicated to Toxcatl:

No one but this man was sacrificed on this day. It was only every four years that others died with him, and these were called *Imalacualhuan*, which means Prisoners of His Food. The year on which these died was a year of jubilee and indulgence.¹⁵⁶

The additional sacrificial victims would therefore have served as “nutrition” to Tezcatlipoca, an extraordinary supply of energy accompanying the feast of penitence and fasting. Durán provided a short description of the fate which awaited a person chosen to become the living image of Tezcatlipoca:

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 108.

¹⁵⁵ Sahagún 1950-1982: III: 1-2.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 107.

(...) on the feast of this god a slave was offered up. Once he had been sacrificed, another slave was immolated on the same day, [one] who had consecrated himself or made a vow to that end. He was delivered to the priests so that the likeness of the god might not be wanting. It was a ceremony involving the renewal of the live god, just as the Holy Sacrament is renewed in the churches. After the man was bathed and washed carefully, he was dressed in a complete attire and insignia of the deity (...).

He was given the name of the god Tezcatlipoca, and all year he went about honored and revered as the god himself. Twelve guards constantly accompanied him to prevent him from fleeing. He was allowed to walk where he pleased, but the guards were always alert, their eyes upon him. If [the man managed] to flee, the most negligent guard took his place, representing the deity until his own death. The man to be sacrificed dwelt in the most sacred chamber of the temple; there he ate and drank; there the lords and the principal men came to revere and serve him. There he was brought victuals like those [eaten by] the great ones; and when he walked about the city, he was accompanied by lords and dignitaries. [The victim] carried a flute in his hand and occasionally played it so that it might be known that he was passing. Women with children in their arms came out, placing the little ones before him, greeting him like a deity, and this was done by most of the people. At night he was placed in a cage made of heavy wooden boards to prevent his escape. When the day of the feast arrived, he was sacrificed at noon as described, and every four years many others [were sacrificed and went] his way.¹⁵⁷

Another chapter dedicated to the feast of Quetzalcoatl in Cholula provided more information on the fate of individuals chosen to become *ixiptla*. It bears many distinct similarities to the description of Titlacauan in the *Florentine Codex*:

(...) forty days before this feast [the feast of Quetzalcoatl] the merchants bought a man who was flawless of hands and feet, without stain or blemish, nor one-eyed, nor with a cloud in

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 126-127.

his eye, nor lame, nor lacking one hand, nor crippled, nor with bleary eyes, nor drooling, nor lacking teeth. He was to have no blemish - none whatsoever - the sutures of his skull closed, nor signs of a cleft chin, nor pustules, nor scrofula - he was to be free of all imperfections! This slave was bought so that, arrayed as a god, he might represent him during those forty days. Before he donned his costume, he was purified by being washed twice in the "divine water." After he had been washed and purified, he was dressed like the idol (...).

This living man was bought to represent the god for forty days, and he was served and revered as such. He was accompanied by his guards and many other persons who attended him during those days. At night he was shut up in a cage to prevent his escaping - as was the impersonator of Tezcatlipoca. In the morning he was brought out of the cage and placed in a prominent place. He was served very good food, and, after he had breakfasted, flowers were placed in his hands and flowery garlands around his neck. Then they went with him about the city as he sang and danced in order to be recognized as the impersonator of the god. These things [were] substituted [for] the flute which the other [Tezcatlipoca] played for the same reason - that of being recognized. When the women and children heard his song, they came out of the houses to greet him and offer him many things as though he were divine.¹⁵⁸

The origin of the future victim was explained - he was a slave bought and "washed" in order to purify and prepare him for the sacrifice. This was a method habitually applied to slaves who were neither former warriors nor war captives seized during flowery wars. Durán previously mentioned the custom of bathing the representative of Tezcatlipoca (which would imply that he could have been bought for the ceremony as well).¹⁵⁹ It contradicted Sahagún's version, in which the *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca Titlacauan was a

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 131-132.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 126.

young warrior and a war captive.¹⁶⁰ The representative of Quetzalcoatl was expected to perform for a number of days and remind the people of his presence; the same can be said about Tezcatlipoca's *ixiptla*. Both of them had to fulfill specific requirements concerning their physical appearance, although Durán did not mention it in reference to the representative of Tezcatlipoca.

The question of voluntary participation seemed to play an important part in the performance. The *Book of the Gods and Rites* contains a description of the methods applied to the victims who opposed their fate; it is highly probable that the representative of Tezcatlipoca underwent the same procedures as the impersonator of Quetzalcoatl in Cholula:

Nine days before the feast two venerable elders, hierarchs of the temple, came before him. Humbling themselves in his presence, they whispered in a low, meek, deferential, and respectful voice: "O Lord, let your worship know that nine days from now your task of singing and dancing will end. Know that you are to die!" And he was expected to answer, "So be it!" This ceremony was called *neyolmaxiltiliztli*, which means "realization" or "fulfillment". Once he had been advised, they kept their eyes on him; and if they saw that he became melancholy, that he stopped dancing joyously, with the happiness he had shown, and with the gaiety they desired, they prepared a heathen, a loathsome spell for him: they went immediately to procure sacrificial knives, washed off the human blood adhering to them (the result of past sacrifices), and with that filthy water prepared a gourd of chocolate, giving it him to drink. It is said that the draught had this effect upon him: he became almost unconscious and forgot what he had been told. Then he returned to his usual cheerfulness and dance, having forgotten the warning he had been given. It is believed he offered himself for death with great joy and gladness, bewitched by the beverage. This drink was called *itzpacalatl*, which means "water from the washing of the obsidian blades". They gave him

¹⁶⁰ Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 64.

this beverage because if the man became sorrowful owing to the warning it was held as an evil omen or sign prognosticating some future disaster.¹⁶¹

It is possible that the sacrificial victim was strictly forbidden to show signs of fear or worry caused by the impending death. The performance had to bear signs of voluntary cooperation and personal satisfaction stemming from the fact that the victim was granted special status and was awarded with the chance of “honorable” and “glorious” death on the sacrificial stone. More importantly, the representative was expected to agree on his death in the presence of appointed witnesses. If he demonstrated symptoms of stress or sadness, he would be required to drink the concoction, which probably contained strong psychedelic drugs of herbal origin; such substances were well known in Mesoamerica and grew there in great abundance.¹⁶² Voluntary participation in the performance was therefore not a requirement *per se*; the victim was expected to *act* like a voluntary participant, although frequently his willingness was a matter of keeping up appearances.

Durán’s *The Ancient Calendar* offers a brief description of Toxcatl, conforming the date and mentioning a ritual of incensing private houses by the minor priests of the wards in exchange for food. Durán explained that the purpose of the entire feast was to pray for rain and to invoke the clouds:

(...) on this day [the first day of the month] there was a general invocation of the main gods: Huitzilopochtli and Tezcatlipoca, the Sun and the goddess Cihuacoatl, All of these were remembered on that day. When the people of each town heard the piping of the flutes which were played on that day, everyone ate earth and prostrated himself on the ground”.¹⁶³ There

¹⁶¹ Durán 1971: 132.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 178.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 428.

is a direct reference to the Toxcatl dance: “On this day a great and solemn dance took place. All crowned themselves with headdresses or miters made up of small painted wreaths, beautifully adorned like latticework. In the small spaces between reed and reed hung little figures of gold or stone or many other finely worked things, for all those who danced were lords or chieftains. This feast was called *Toxcanetotiliztli*, which means Dance of Toxcatl.¹⁶⁴

Durán combined the description of both the annual festival and the penance feast that took place every four years, stating that the usual food on this day were birds and human flesh of the sacrificial victims. It had already been explained that the additional human sacrifice accompanied the celebration in four year intervals.¹⁶⁵

7.0. José de Acosta and Juan de Tovar

Most Mesoamerican scholars believe that Durán’s *Book of the Gods and Rites* was based on an earlier Nahuatl source, the so-called *Crónica X*, written shortly after the conquest by unknown Christianized Aztec authors.¹⁶⁶ Although the original 16th century manuscript had long been lost and there are no official copies of the document, the knowledge of its existence is based on the fact that there are numerous striking similarities between the *Book of the Gods and Rites*, the *Ramírez Codex* written presumably by Juan de Tovar and José de Acosta’s *Natural and moral history of the Indies*.¹⁶⁷

The descriptions of Toxcatl in the aforementioned works are practically identical; the structure of the narrative, its style and context clearly indicate that these manuscripts were based on a common source. Since Durán’s

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 107, 428.

¹⁶⁶ Barlow 1945; Bernal 1994.

¹⁶⁷ Acosta 2002; Durán 1971; Tovar 1979.

work is the most comprehensive one of the three, containing additional commentaries and personal remarks crucial to complete understanding of the Toxcatl feast, the author of this dissertation used the *Book of the Gods and Rites* as a primary source and reference. The other two works do not bring new information to the picture and therefore can be mentioned only for the purposes of this introduction.

8.0. Juan Bautista Pomar

Another primary source on Toxcatl festival, *Relación de Texcoco*, was written by Juan Bautista Pomar (c. 1535 – 1590). The information about the author is scarce; he was a son of a Spaniard and a natural daughter of Nezahualpilli, the penultimate ruler of Texcoco. His maternal great-grandfather was Nezahualcoyotl, also a *tlatoani* of Texcoco, one of the architects of the Triple Alliance.

Pomar was raised as a Christian and received a thorough education. He was fluent in both Spanish and Nahuatl; his noble-born mother introduced him to the history and culture of Texcoco as well as other great cities of the Aztec Empire.¹⁶⁸ He considered himself a loyal subject to the Spanish Crown and a successor to the Texcoco's royal family. Pomar spent most of his life trying to regain his family's wealth and social position through petitions to the Spanish King - to little avail. He did manage to obtain one of Nezahualcoyotl's royal houses in Texcoco.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Pomar 1975: xviii.

¹⁶⁹ Carrera Stampa 1971: 211-212.

His major work, *Relación de Texcoco*, which was completed in 1582, had been written as a response to the questionnaire commissioned by the Spanish king Philip II in 1577.¹⁷⁰ The original text is missing; a copy was published in 1891 by Joaquin García Izcazbalceta.

Juan Bautista Pomar spent almost five years interviewing senior citizens of Texcoco and gathering material on Aztec culture, religious beliefs, political organization, etc. Pomar did not respond to the questionnaire directly; he chose to give the answers a free narrative form.

It is important to note that this work was not prepared of Pomar's own will and initiative, but rather as a fulfillment of his obligations as a royal subject. In the narrative he often identified himself as a member of the colonial society but still openly criticized the process of conquest and colonization and its results - the destruction of indigenous historical sources, the diseases brought by the Spaniards to New Spain and the reduction of the native inhabitants to a life of servitude and poverty.¹⁷¹ Pomar chose to portray the most glorious representatives of the Texcoco nobility, presenting them in a more favorable light. This selective treatment of data poses a serious question about its relevance and trustworthiness. The picture of indigenous justice and the supposedly peaceful nature of Texcoco inhabitants painted in the *Relación* was idealized and greatly exaggerated.

In relation to religion and human sacrifice Pomar took a similar stance as Sahagún and Durán. He called human sacrifice a "diabolical invention",

¹⁷⁰ Adorno 2006: 73. Printed and filled out questionnaires gathered from all the regions of the Spanish Americas went on to constitute the *Relaciones Geográficas de América*, one of the most comprehensive sources on the conditions of daily life, indigenous cultures and medicine, geography etc. from that period of time.

¹⁷¹ Pomar 1975: 56.

described Aztec priests as “devil’s servants” and criticized polytheism.¹⁷² He depicted religious practices with a mixture of awe, fascination and respectful averseness.

8.1. Relación de Texcoco

The manuscript prepared by Juan Bautista Pomar provides significantly less details on the celebration of Toxcatl than the works of Sahagún and Durán. The entire narrative aimed to address issues included in the questionnaire commissioned by Philip II. The author intended to picture life in Texcoco before the Spanish Conquest and he paid special attention to native religious practices. Tezcatlipoca, Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc were mentioned as the principal Texcocan deities; the chapter contributed to Tezcatlipoca included a description of his feast.¹⁷³

According to Pomar, Tezcatlipoca had been represented continuously by a war captive who demonstrated his courage on the battlefield. The perfect candidate was usually a native of Huexotzinco or Tlaxcala: two cities that had never been subdued by the Triple Alliance. Both of them, together with Cholula, Atlixco, Tecoac and Tliluhquitepec engaged in regular flowery wars against Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tlacopan.¹⁷⁴ It can be deduced that these skirmishes served as a means to obtain war captives for ritual sacrifice; the warriors from Tlaxcala and Huexotzinco were famous for their fighting skills,

¹⁷² Pomar 1975: 16-17, 24-25

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁷⁴ Durán 1994: 233-237; Pomar 1975: 9.

bravery and fierceness. Because of these exceptional qualities they were highly valued by the Aztecs as potential sacrificial victims.¹⁷⁵

According to Pomar, the chosen representative of Tezcatlipoca was allowed to leave the shrine at midnight and take a walk through the city or its surroundings. He was accompanied by two servants who followed from a distance “*within a stone’s throw*”.¹⁷⁶ The impersonator woke people up with the sound of the bells fastened to his ankles and the flute he was occasionally playing. On hearing the deity passing, people burned incense at home and spread the smoke in the four cardinal directions. Some people went outside to greet the representative and incensed him as a sign of reverence.

The young man was expected to come back to his quarters before sunset; Pomar explained that the captive was strictly forbidden to see daylight and that he left the shrine every single night of his “duty”, sleeping through the day.¹⁷⁷ The man wore a net mantle and his hair had been shaved; directly before the sacrifice he had been clad in Tezcatlipoca’s full attire, described by Pomar earlier in the chapter.¹⁷⁸

The author expressed his admiration for the courage demonstrated by the prisoner. He noted that despite being given so much freedom during his service and despite being perfectly aware of his gruesome fate, the captive never tried to flee or offer a slave to be sacrificed instead of him. Pomar explained that such behavior would be considered undignified. The men who

¹⁷⁵ Pomar 1975: 9.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 8, 10.

were selected to represent such a majestic and powerful deity were expected to embody courage and determination; every symptom of weakness and cowardice would bring them “*perpetual infamy*” not only in Texcoco, but also in their respective native cities. Death on a sacrificial stone granted them eternal fame in addition to proving their value as warriors and heroes.¹⁷⁹

Pomar mentioned that the captive had an opportunity to delay his fate and live beyond the given year. If he fulfilled his duties with special dedication and if the *tlatoani* was satisfied with his service, the ruler could have let the captive survive and replace him with a slave on the altar. However, it was merely a postponement. Sooner or later, the *ixiptla* was bound to die during the culmination of Toxcatl.¹⁸⁰

9.0. Monarquía Indiana

The monumental source of information on pre-Conquest and early colonial Mexico, *Los veinte y un libros rituales y monarquía indiana, con el origen y guerras de los indios occidentales, de sus poblaciones, descubrimientos, conquista, conversión, y otras cosas maravillosas*, was written between 1609 and 1613 by a Spanish-born Franciscan friar and historian Juan de Torquemada (c.1562-1624).

Torquemada arrived in New Spain as a child; he entered the Franciscan convent and learned Nahuatl and philosophy from the graduates of the Colegio Imperial de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco - the same institution in which fray Bernardino de Sahagún used to teach. Torquemada worked as a

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 21-22.

guardian of the convents of Zacatlán (1600-1601), Tulancingo (1602), Tlatelolco (1603-1612), Tlaxcala (1612-1613) and Xochimilco (1613-1614).

Without a doubt he drew from other published and unpublished sources while preparing his chronicle; he also gathered information from his Nahua informants in Tlatelolco and Tlaxcala. It is known that Torquemada had access to native manuscripts from Tenochtitlan, Tlatelolco, Azcapotzalco, Puebla, Tlaxcala and Tezcoco. He also relied heavily on the works of other 16th-century scholars.¹⁸¹ The description of Toxcatl in *Monarquía indiana* bears many similarities to the *Florentine Codex* and Durán's *Book of the Gods and Rites*; Torquemada directly addressed Sahagún's work in the beginning of the chapter.¹⁸²

According to Torquemada, Toxcatl was the fifth *veintena* of the Aztec calendar: it began on April 24 and ended on May 14. The festival was dedicated to Tezcatlipoca (also referred to as "Titlacahua"), as well as to Huitzilopochtli. Torquemada was convinced that the ceremony mocked the Resurrection of Christ.¹⁸³

The similarities between *Monarquía Indiana* and the *Book of Gods and Rites* are most notable in the fourteenth chapter of the second volume of the former, in which Torquemada described a penitential feast taking place every four years. He wrote that ten days before the end of that *veintena*, the living "idol" of Tezcatlipoca had been garbed in ceremonial clothes by his priest and that he participated in a procession. The "idol" went outside the temple,

¹⁸¹ Carrasco 2001: 247-248.

¹⁸² Torquemada 1969: 256.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

carrying flowers and a clay pipe. He played the pipe in the four cardinal directions starting with the East; after that he remained silent for a moment, took some earth between the fingers and put it in his mouth as a sign of “humility and adoration”.¹⁸⁴ His worshippers followed him in this act, prostrated on the ground and called for the Night and the Wind (Tezcatlipoca) to release them from the earthly labor and take them to the place of rest.

Thieves, fornicators, murderers and other sinners trembled with fear and did penitence for ten days and offered incense in order to ask Tezcatlipoca for help in hiding their transgressions from the community. Warriors and veterans asked the god for victory and numerous war captives, which would later be sacrificed in his honor. Torquemada made a similar observation as Durán on the nature of such penitence and reverence among the Aztecs: they were not afraid of the eternal damnation or punishment in the afterlife, but wanted to avoid corporal punishment and torment during their lifetime.¹⁸⁵

On the eve of the final day of the Toxcatl festival the “idol” was adorned with new clothes and ornaments. He was released from his confinement and made available for public viewing after the curtain covering the entrance to the shrine fell symbolically.¹⁸⁶ The following day the entire city gathered in the courtyard of the temple to celebrate Toxcatl and to plead for rain. The priests of Tezcatlipoca, dressed in a manner similar to the idol (as described

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 257.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

previously by Durán), carried his image to the foot of the temple pyramid.¹⁸⁷ They were followed by the boys and girls from the “convents” decorated with garlands and necklaces made of popcorn. The youth adorned the *ixiptla* with popcorn ornaments, which, according to Torquemada, symbolized sterility and dryness of the season.¹⁸⁸ People used maguey thorns to self-mutilate and offered their blood to the god. A procession of followers circled the courtyard, incensing the idol and sending their prayers to the sky with the smoke.¹⁸⁹

Torquemada described the *ixiptla* as “*semejanza de Tezcatlipoca*” – “Tezcatlipoca’s resemblance”.¹⁹⁰ The subsequent paragraphs were most probably based on the information provided by the *Florentine Codex* and they bear high stylistic resemblance to the original. The author wrote that every year the natives chose a young man to transform him into a living image of Tezcatlipoca. The selected man was a paragon of elegance and beauty. He was kept under constant guard and he was carefully trained in certain skills, such as courtly speech and pipe smoking. The captive was allowed to take walks only in the company of guards; he spoke eloquently to the people, who honored and adored him.¹⁹¹

Twenty days before the end of Toxcatl, in the beginning of the *veintena*, the impersonator was granted four women as companions and he underwent an image transformation – his long hair had been cut short in a manner

¹⁸⁷ It was not explained whether the image was a statute or the *ixiptla* himself.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 259.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., p. 260.

resembling a warrior captain, and he received a wardrobe makeover.¹⁹² Five days before his death the young man attended numerous parties and dinners in palaces of the nobility. Notably, the *tlatoani* was not to be seen during that time.¹⁹³

On the final day of his performance, the representative of Tezcatlipoca traveled to Tlapitzahuayan; his female companions could not travel further with him and they were taken back to Tenochtitlan. The captive, accompanied by guards, went to visit the temple of Tezcatlipoca in Tlacoachcalco; there he was supposed to be sacrificed.¹⁹⁴

In this part of the narration, Torquemada described the captive climbing to the summit of the pyramid, breaking the clay flutes on each step. A procession followed the representative to the temple and proceeded with the offerings while the young man awaited his death. Participants of the procession offered mantles, jewelry, incense, food and quails (which were ritually beheaded by a priest).

After the offerings people came back to their homes to have dinner; the feast was being suspended until they finished and were able to proceed with the festivities. Meanwhile, the “convent” girls brought food offered to Tezcatlipoca, which was distributed among the elders of the temple and priests.¹⁹⁵

After the meal was over and the people gathered again in the courtyard of the temple, the ritual continued. Five priests spread the *ixiptla* on the

¹⁹² Ibid., p. 260.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

sacrificial stone; the high priest opened his chest and extracted his heart. The body was carefully carried down to the base of the pyramid, flayed, cut into pieces and distributed between nobles to be consumed during a ceremonial meal; his head was placed on the *tzompantli* (skull rack).

Torquemada mentions other men dedicated to Tezcatlipoca, who went dancing and singing in joyous celebration of the completed ritual.¹⁹⁶ He also described the four-year-interval variant of Toxcatl and its additional human sacrifice; that passage was almost identical with the corresponding fragment of the *Book of the Gods and Rites*. There was also a mention of the “race” between the young men who delivered the food to the elders in order to receive favors.¹⁹⁷

Torquemada dedicated an entire chapter to the description of rituals performed in honor of Huitzilopochtli during Toxcatl; without any doubt that section was based on the descriptions provided by Sahagún in the *Florentine Codex* and by Durán in his *Book of the Gods and Rites*. Torquemada depicted the same scenario of the ceremony, the same offerings to Huitzilopochtli as well as the same participants of the feast, but he also introduced new information which had not been mentioned in the works of his predecessors. He provided new details on the second male *ixiptla* who appeared during Toxcatl - the impersonator of Huitzilopochtli called Ixteocale:

Ixteocale (...) que quiere decir: Ojos del Señor de la Casa Divina, ò del Señor Divino de la Casa; y por otro nombre Tlacapehua, que es nombre del otro Dios, compañero de este Huitzilupuchtli, cuja imagen era este Cautivo, llamado también Teiccauhtzin, que quiere

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 261.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

decir: Hermano menor, por quanto tenían por maior à Huitzilupuchtli.¹⁹⁸ Estos dos Mancebos...el dedicado à Tezcatlipuca, y este consagrado a Huitzilupuchtli, andaban juntos todo el Año de su elección, para el Sacrificio de este Día; pero avia mucha diferencia entre los dos: porque al que representaba à Tezcatlipuca, ò Titlacahua, adoraban, y reconocían como à Dios, o como à imagen de aquel Dios, cuio principio, y origen no conocían, ni sabían... y à estotro, llamado Huitzilupuchtli, no adoraban, ni miraban con este respeto...¹⁹⁹

The candidate was most probably a slave and it appears that he was not expected to fulfill such high requirements as the *ixiptla* of Titlacauan. Torquemada did not provide any information on the origin or the former occupation of that *ixiptla*; it is possible that these factors were not considered at all during the selection process because the candidate was not expected to undergo such an extensive training as his counterpart. There was only a short reference to his sacrificial attire, which appeared very modest compared to the clothes and insignia worn by Titlacauan – he wore a garb made of painted paper and cotton, decorated with eagle feathers; he was covered with a net mantle.

Ixteucal-Tlacauepan was expected to lead common people to a dance on the courtyard of the temple. According to Torquemada, he was not sacrificed in the similar way as Titlacauan (who was led to the temple and followed a certain itinerary) but rather chose the moment of his death and abandoned the dance when he thought it was appropriate. Apparently nobody forced him directly to leave the courtyard and head to the temple, which might give the impression that he did that willingly, on his own volition, as an act of

¹⁹⁸ Although Torquemada describes Tlacauepan as an *ixiptla* of “Huitzilopochtli’s younger brother”, it is more likely that he was simply an impersonator of Huitzilopochtli’s avatar, in the same manner as Titlacauan being one of Tezcatlipuca’s manifestations.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 265.

personal freedom.²⁰⁰ Hesitation and deliberate delay on such occasions were considered a sign of weakness and cowardice by the Aztecs; in order to gain fame and glory, to be considered worthy of representing the god of war, the representative was expected to volunteer for death as soon as possible without disrupting the ceremonial order. Subsequently he was sacrificed and his body was disposed of in the same manner as that of Titlacauan – according to Torquemada, their remains were laid on a bench next to each other.²⁰¹

Alternative name for Toxcatl – the Feast of Huitzilopochtli’s Incense - was provided in the last section of that chapter.²⁰² It may have been connected to a ritual of incensing private houses: the palaces of the nobility, the residences of priests, as well as the humble abodes of the commoners. The incense used for this purpose - *chapopotli* - was of special variety: it was made of a rare type of rubber and it possessed a characteristically strong smell.

Torquemada noted that on that same day many additional captives were sacrificed in honor of “*this dirty Huitzilopochtli*”.²⁰³ The mass sacrifice was accompanied by a priestly dance called *atepocaxixilihua*.

The author also wrote that priests drew blood from cuts on the breast, stomachs, wrists and arms of little children, thus marking them as being “accepted” by Huitzilopochtli.²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 266.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

10.0. Preliminary conclusions

After a content analysis, the aforementioned sources can be put in order according to their place of origin and the date of completion (see Table 6).

Tables 7 and 8 are showing in which primary sources specific Toxcatl actors and ritual elements were mentioned. The data will be further analyzed after a review of the most popular contemporary theories on the significance of Toxcatl in the following chapter.

SOURCE	DATE	ORIGIN
Codex Magliabechiano	ca. 1550	Valley of Mexico
Codex Borbonicus	1530-1541	Valley of Mexico
Memoriales (Motolinía)	1536-1541	Tlaxcala
Primeros Memoriales	1559-1561	Tepepolco
Florentine Codex	ca. 1577	Tlatelolco
Book of the Gods and Rites	1574-1576	Valley of Mexico
The Ancient Calendar	1575	Valley of Mexico
Relación de Texcoco	1582	Texcoco
Monarquía indiana	1609-1613	Tlatelolco, Tlaxcala

Table 6. 16th- and 17th-century sources on Toxcatl.

SOURCE	Tezcatlipoca	Huitzilopochtli	<i>Ixiptla</i> Tezcatlipoca/ Titlacauan	<i>Ixiptla</i> Huitzilopochtli/ Tlacauepan	Other <i>ixiptla</i>	Other deity
Codex Magliabechiano	X		X			
Codex Borbonicus	X	X				X
Motolinía	X		X			
Primeros Memoriales	X	X				X
Florentine Codex	X	X	X	X	X	
Durán	X	X	X			
Pomar	X	X	X			
Torquemada	X	X	X	X	X	

Table 7. The occurrence of deities and *ixiptla* in selected primary sources.

SOURCE/Ritual element	dance	incensing	Penance Confession	Human sacrifice	Dough image	Quail offering
Codex Magliabechiano	x				x	
Codex Borbonicus	x	x				
Motolinía	x			x	x	
Primeros Memoriales	x					x
Florentine Codex	x	x		x	x	x
Durán	x	x	x	x	x	x
Pomar		x		x		
Torquemada	x	x	x	x		x

Table 8. Ritual elements described in the selected primary sources on the Toxcatl festival.

CHAPTER 3

CONTEMPORARY THEORIES ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TOXCATL

1.0. Foreword

The following chapter is dedicated to the revision and the evaluation of the modern interpretations of Toxcatl. The list does not include all the scholars who were interested in this subject: the selection was based on the innovativeness of the contribution that the academics paid to the discipline of pre-Columbian studies, on the uniqueness of their ideas, and on the impact their research had on the general understanding of the Aztec spirituality and ritual.

The first notable attempts to interpret the significance of the Aztec *veintenas* were carried out in the second half of the nineteenth-century; the most recent theories are based on the state-of-the-art archeological discoveries in the Valley of Mexico. Some of the scholars chose to review the ideas of their predecessors and they provided additional interpretation of a given ritual or focused on its different aspects. Another group of investigators entirely rejected existing theories and offered alternative explanations; the extent of disparities between these theories shows precisely how complex the Aztec ceremonies were.

1.1. The name of the *veintena* in Nahuatl

The most comprehensive contemporary analysis of the *veintena*'s name can be found in Guilhem Olivier's monograph on Tezcatlipoca.²⁰⁵ The author assembled and reviewed 16th-century and modern theories on the origin of the term *Toxcatl*; his research is so thorough that it will be quoted here in nearly his entirety.

Durán was the first to propose a translation of *Toxcatl*; his informants explained to him that the native inhabitants of the Valley of Mexico used to pray to Tezcatlipoca for rain and an expression *titotoxcauia* signified "to dry out of thirst". The friar interpreted the term *Toxcatl* as "something dry", "a dry thing" and indicated that it was also the name of a necklace made of popcorn, used during the ceremonial dance; therefore the name of the *veintena* would mean "drought and lack of water".²⁰⁶

Although this translation was widely accepted by the majority of modern scholars, it was rejected by Eduard Seler who claimed that the term was associated with roasted corn. He indicated a city-glyph of Toxico which showed roasted corn grains on a string. Seler argued that Durán's translation of *toxcatl* as "something dry" was inspired by the fact that the *Toxcatl* festival took place during the dry season.²⁰⁷

George Raynaud proposed that the original transcription should be *tozcatl* which means "necklace".²⁰⁸ Another idea was suggested by Wigberto Jiménez Moreno who drew attention to the relation between *tozquitl* ("voice, song,

²⁰⁵ Olivier 2004: 346-349.

²⁰⁶ Durán 1967: I: 40-41, 255; quoted in Olivier 2004: 347.

²⁰⁷ Seler 1899: 116.

²⁰⁸ Raynaud 1899: 18; quoted in Olivier 2004: 347.

throat”), *cozcatl* (“necklace”) and *tozcatl* or *Toxcatl*. He noted that the popcorn necklaces were worn during the one of the festival dances. Moreno also speculated that *tozcatl* was an archaic form of *tezcatl* (“mirror”).²⁰⁹

The *Toxcatl veintena* had alternative names in various parts of the Valley of Mexico. Motolinía mentioned the terms *Tepupochhuiliztli* and *Tepopochihuiliztli*.²¹⁰ Various publications also mentioned the names *Tepopochtli* and *Popochtli*.²¹¹ Alfonso Caso suggested a translation for the abovementioned names as “incensing” (*sahumerio*); Michel Graulich interpreted them as “incensing”, “incense” or “smoke”.²¹²

1.2. *Toxcatl* equivalents in other indigenous languages

Guilhem Olivier investigated the correlation between the Nahuatl term *Toxcatl* and the terms describing a similar event in other Mesoamerican languages.²¹³ In his publication he mentioned the research conducted previously by Jacques Soustelle, in which many equivalent words could be found. According to Soustelle, the Otomi language used the terms *Pitich* and *Atzibihpi* which could have derived from the form *bihpi* meaning “smoke”.²¹⁴ A Cakchiquel term *Cibixic* could be translated as “cloudy” or “smoke”.²¹⁵ A Yucatec *Moan* or *Muan* could signify “cloudy”. Graulich interpreted *Moan* as a substitution for “smoke” or “incense”; he also suggested a possible translation of *Muan* as “owl”, a nocturnal animal that was frequently

²⁰⁹ Sahagún 1974: 31; quoted by Olivier 2004: 347.

²¹⁰ Motolinía 1971: 45. *Códice Tudela* 1980: pic. 15r.

²¹¹ *Relación geográfica de Teutitlan* 1984: 199. *Relación geográfica de Meztitlan* 1986: 56.

²¹² Caso 1967: 35. Graulich 1999: 340.

²¹³ Graulich 2004: 348-349.

²¹⁴ Soustelle 1937: 524-526, quoted in Olivier 2004: 348.

²¹⁵ Caso 1967: table XI; quoted in Olivier 2004: 348.

associated with Tezcatlipoca.²¹⁶ Caso related a Matlatzinca name of the *veintena* – *Dehuni* – to a word “*undintin*” signifying “we are going to roast corn”.²¹⁷

2.0. Modern interpretations of Toxcatl

2.1. Eduard Seler

In his groundbreaking work on the Aztec *veintenas* *Die achtzehn Jahresfeste der Mexikaner* (1899) the German scholar laid foundation for the future research on deciphering Native American codices and influenced the future generations of Mesoamerican ethnographers. It is therefore important to explain that as pioneer in this field of study, Seler was prone to incorrect interpretations and he often made assumptions that were neither supported by evidence or sources nor limited by anything but his imagination.

This holds true regarding Seler’s analysis of Toxcatl. Ignoring source material, or more accurately, the lack of it, Seler stated that the *veintena* was in fact a feast of the beginning of the year. Many years later he reviewed his original hypothesis which claimed that Tezcatlipoca represented the New Year and that he was the son of the Sun. The death of his *ixiptla* during Toxcatl would symbolize the cycle of nature’s renewal. Seler also suggested that Toxcatl represented the change of seasons: the Black Tezcatlipoca, who symbolized the Winter and the Night, was confronted with the Red Tezcatlipoca (Huitzilopochtli) representing the Summer and the Sun.

²¹⁶ Graulich 1999: 340; quoted in Olivier 2004: 349.

²¹⁷ Caso 1967: 231.

The German researcher further explained his theories in the commentaries that he contributed to several pictorial manuscripts.²¹⁸ He claimed that Tezcatlipoca used to be a solar deity that lost a battle with the primordial earth monster (who symbolized the earth) and was able to survive that with the use of his magic powers. In the aftermath of that battle he was turned into a nocturnal deity. Seler compared Tezcatlipoca to the Mayan god Hurakan; he noted that in the *Popol Vuh* Hurakan was called “The Heart of the Sky” and in his opinion this meant that that he was a solar deity as well.

Seler concluded that Tezcatlipoca’s magical transformation into a nocturnal deity was reenacted during Toxcatl. Tezcatlipoca came back to the world renewed and that is why he was represented by a young man. During the ceremonial cycle the divine representative turned into a mature warrior and went back to the point of origin with the symbolic renewal on the sacrificial stone. Seler compared the *ixiptla*’s ascent on the pyramid steps to the Sun travelling skywards. He assumed that Toxcatl was the first month of the ritual calendar; it appears that he mistook Toxcatl for the New Fire ceremony when he called it the moment of the completion of the 52-year-long cycle.

According to Seler, during Toxcatl the Black Tezcatlipoca represented the weakening and dying Winter Sun preparing to be reborn. The Red Tezcatlipoca (Huitzilopochtli) played the part of the young and ascending Summer Sun. Toxcatl was supposed to be the polar opposite of the *veintena* Atemoztli, (“the Falling of Water”). In consequence, Toxcatl would symbolize the change of seasons and the beginning of winter in the Valley of Mexico.

²¹⁸ Seler’s commentaries on Toxcatl can be found in: *Codex Fejérváry-Mayer* 1901: 6; *Codex Vaticanus B*: 1902: 9; and *Códice Borjia* 1963: I: 23, 114-116, 153-156.

Seler correlated the *veintena* with the astronomical event of the Sun standing in its zenith. Both concepts are easily proven false: between 1519 and 1520 Toxcatl fell on May 23, approximately one month after the beginning of the rainy season in that region, and fifteen days after the Sun reached its zenith.²¹⁹

Albeit most of Seler's concepts were proven wrong by the subsequent research, the German academic contributed greatly to the development of the entire discipline of Mesoamerican studies. He was the first scholar to notice certain patterns behind the *veintenas* and to indicate their correlation with the agricultural cycle and social activities associated with it in the Aztec culture. Seler linked several astronomical events (like the solar zenith, equinoxes and solstices) to the rituals celebrated during the *veintenas* and attempted to establish a definite model of this correspondence. Even though his presumptions were not always accurate, his research was truly groundbreaking and it encouraged other researchers to follow in Seler's footsteps.

2.2. Konrad Theodor Preuss

Preuss, a German ethnologist, criticized Seler's concept of Tezcatlipoca as solar deity in his publication on pre-Colombian fertility cults in Mexico. He claimed that Tezcatlipoca was a fertility deity.²²⁰ Preuss based his theory on the passage from the *Florentine Codex* in which the *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca was given four women at his disposal; the scholar assumed that the divine

²¹⁹ Graulich 1999: 344.

²²⁰ Preuss1903:154-156.

representative maintained sexual relations with these women during the entire *veintena* of Toxcatl. According to Preuss, the beginning of Toxcatl coincided with the arrival of four concubines impersonating goddesses of “flora”, maize, water and salt. It was also the time when the *ixiptla* underwent his metamorphosis and reached his physical, social and sexual maturity. Preuss claimed that the main purpose of the Toxcatl ceremony was the fertility ritual during which the divine impersonators were expected to conceive strong, healthy offspring.

The German scholar was convinced that in case of Toxcatl the ritual killing was not intended to revive an old and weak deity because Tezcatlipoca’s impersonator was at his peak when he was sacrificed. Preuss indicated that it was the reason why no corpse flaying and no skin-wearing took place after the killing: Tezcatlipoca never aged and he did not require rejuvenation.

The abovementioned interpretation is limited to one single aspect of the entire Toxcatl performance: the assumption that it was principally a fertility cult. Four women accompanying the impersonator were mentioned only in Sahagún’s relation and they were completely ignored by Seler in his analysis of the *veintenas*.

Preuss seemed to make one valid point: the sexual dynamics between actors and the rite of passage the *ixiptla* underwent deserve a thorough analysis. Fertility cults stem from agrarian rites and they are tightly connected to the four seasons as well as to the cycle of death and renewal. Preuss drew attention to the fact that Tezcatlipoca never grew old due to his annual demise and miraculous, instantaneous rebirth. The god maintained his

youthful, virile posture and sexual potency even though he had to wait the whole cycle for the privilege of producing offspring. It could have been a symbol of nature's power and annual regeneration.

2.3. Laurette Séjourné

In her book on the pre-Conquest Mexican philosophy Séjourné addressed Seler's concept of the connection between Toxcatl and the Sun passing its zenith.²²¹ Ignoring the astronomical and chronological inconsistencies the French scholar argued that the last twenty days of *ixiptla's* life during Toxcatl were connected to the winter solstice, even though the latter takes place in December. According to Séjourné, the *ixiptla's* death represented the cosmic resurrection of the Sun which fought against the earth to avoid getting devoured by it. During Toxcatl the earth monster would be represented by the four women companions who were given to the representative and, after twenty days of struggle, Tezcatlipoca was killed and revived as Huitzilopochtli – the Sun. Séjourné compared this resurrection to the birth of Venus from Quetzalcoatl's ashes.

The French scholar interpreted the act of transporting the statue of Huitzilopochtli to the top of the pyramid temple as a symbol of this deity's ascent to heaven. She suggested that this part of the Toxcatl performance reminded the community that all warriors fallen on the battlefield joined the Sun in his journey through the sky.

²²¹ Séjourné 1982: 160-161.

There is no mention of Huitzilopochtli's rise from Tezcatlipoca's burned body in the codices or any other early colonial sources. Séjourné based her hypothesis on Seler's interpretation of the festival and due to the fact that her German predecessor erroneously connected Toxcatl to the winter solstice, her entire argument seems to be invalid.

2.4. Burr Cartwright Brundage

Brundage, a prolific writer and erudite, reflected on the nature of Toxcatl in his extensive publication on the Aztec ritual life.²²² He indicated two aspects of the feast: the contingent nature of *tlatoani's* office and the metamorphosis of the divine representative.

The first aspect was related to the ruler of Tenochtitlan's part in the Toxcatl ceremony. The *Florentine Codex* noted that the *tlatoani* retreated to his private chambers during the last five days of the *veintena* and that he remained hidden from the public eye until the sacrifice of the *ixiptla* was completed. Brundage suggested that this period of seclusion represented the ruler's acknowledgment of Tezcatlipoca's supremacy.

Tezcatlipoca was considered the source of ruler's prerogatives and he legitimized *tlatoani's* power over his people. The god was eternal and so was his sovereignty over mankind. The *tlatoani* was merely his vassal, his representative on earth and therefore his power came directly from Tezcatlipoca. The ruler's voluntary seclusion during Toxcatl could have symbolized his recognition of the god's superior claim. The relationship

²²² Brundage 1985: 48-50.

between Tezcatlipoca and the Aztec ruler was mentioned in the Book VI of the *Florentine Codex* and it will be analyzed in detail in Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

Brundage made another valuable observation: *ixiptla*'s death, as seen from a theatrical point of view, became a "purely divine consummation", since even though the representative died on the sacrificial stone, the god lived forever in the next impersonator.²²³ The transformation of the *ixiptla* from a virginal youth to a perfect specimen of masculinity and a mature warrior could have represented Tezcatlipoca's "career" and a vast array of his attributes. Tezcatlipoca was presented as an example for young men, someone to refer to in order to choose an ideal career path and to follow widely acknowledged standards of masculinity and perfect conduct.

Both aspects addressed by Brundage deserve closer and more thorough examination. The concept of male perfection in the Aztec society and its link to the divine representative will be discussed in Chapter 5.

As a final point, Brundage stated that Toxcatl was the only ceremony so openly engaging an Aztec individual rather than the whole community: not only the society as a whole could meet and confront the sphere of the divine, but it was also possible for a single Aztec individual.

²²³ Ibid., p. 50.

2.5. Doris Heyden

Heyden analyzed the religious, political and economic importance of the Toxcatl festival in one of her articles.²²⁴ In her opinion, the ceremony was linked to seasonality, to the interchanging periods of drought and rain. She based her theory on Francisco de las Navas' translation of Toxcatl as *deslizadero* or *resbaladero*, meaning "that which is slippery". Heyden interpreted this translation as the dry season "slipping" into the wet season: the *veintena* could have celebrated the end of the dry season and the beginning of the rainy period.

This interpretation seems plausible because May in the Valley of Mexico actually is the last month of the dry season. In consequence, Heyden's theory would agree with the basic astronomical and meteorological factors unlike Seler's concept of Tezcatlipoca representing the dying Winter Sun.

Heyden accepted Sahagún's chronology and claimed that the sacrifice of Tezcatlipoca-Titlacauan's *ixiptla* took place in the beginning of the feast, symbolizing the end of the dry season. She pointed out that the sacrifice of Huitzilopochtli/Ixteucale, whose representative lived a life so unlike his more glamorous and elegant counterpart, was held at the end of the festival and therefore countered the death of Titlacauan; Huitzilopochtli's sacrifice would symbolize sustenance and coincide with the beginning of Etzalcualiztli - the feast of abundance and rain.

²²⁴ Heyden 1991: 188-202.

2.6. David Carrasco

Carrasco, a historian of religions, put Tezcatlipoca's characteristic attributes in the center of his interpretation of Toxcatl. The deity's omnipresence and omniscience were symbolically reflected in the performance, emphasizing the significance of divine metamorphosis and the change of ceremonial landscape. The *ixiptla*, a human body encapsulating a divine force, underwent powerful transformations and travelled through a wide-ranging ceremonial landscape; he provided his followers with a chance to experience synesthesia through the living image of Tezcatlipoca and through the sounds of his flute, signaling his presence and all-encompassing awareness. Through movement and transformations the representative saturated the ceremonial landscape with the presence of Tezcatlipoca; ritual incensing submerged the homes of his followers in his presence. Thus the god permeated time and space in a cycle of ritual renewal, always present and observing.²²⁵

According to Carrasco, the entire ceremony presented the concept of the perfect life and the ideal death of a warrior in the Aztec world. It was structured through the transformations of the *ixiptla* in a following pattern: warrior → perfect body → cultural paragon → king's god → sexual potency → seasoned warrior → sacrificed deity.

The representative would serve as a perfect embodiment of a certain quality, a set of valued characteristics. His transformations would allow him to encompass the entire spectrum in one year-long performance. This paragon

²²⁵ Carrasco 1991: 31-57.

of perfection frequently changed locations while travelling with his entourage (within the city limits or outside of them); the irregular pattern of Tezcatlipoca's journeys could have represented his omnipresence.

Carrasco categorically rejected the notion of Tenochtitlan as the center of the world. In his opinion, Toxcatl did not present Tenochtitlan as the *axis mundi*; the vision of place in the festival was not locative, it organized space by powerful transformations and metamorphoses, in which the terrain of the sacred was not concentrated, limited, or restricted to one or several locations. This ceremonial landscape was connected by the physical movement of people traveling through the land. The ritual cycle ensured that there was a constant flow from the center of the *altepetl* (city-state) to the *calpultin* (corporate groups).²²⁶

2.7. Inga Clendinnen

The Australian scholar explored the depths of Toxcatl performance from an angle that was deliberately omitted by the strict and pious 16th-century researchers: the erotic and sexual appeal of the Tezcatlipoca-Titlacauan impersonator.²²⁷

According to Clendinnen, the young man possessed a special appeal of a person whose faith had been sealed: he was sentenced to death from the moment he was chosen to play his part. He was also physically alluring and he embodied the qualities that were considered attractive and desirable in the Aztec society. The author recalled a similar example of such glamour

²²⁶ Carrasco 1999: 124.

²²⁷ Clendinnen 1992: 105-110.

found among the Plains Indians: some young men, plagued with melancholy and angst, publicly vowed to seek death on the warpath. From that moment on they were liberated from social restrictions and were allowed to have sex with any willing woman without the risk of habitual penalty. They adorned themselves richly and enjoyed the admiration of the opposite sex until their death, which was mourned by the community with full formality.

Clendinnen suggested that the same principle applied to the *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca-Titlacauan: he was admired and worshipped by women and he was given four sexual partners after he underwent the transformation. He changed his attire to that of a seasoned, experienced warrior and he was destined to be sacrificed. His beauty and sexual allure were reinforced in the eyes of the society by his impending death; the drama of doomed youth appealed strongly to the people.

The sacrifice itself was hidden from the audience, as opposed to other ritual killings of the *xiuhpohualli*. Clendinnen suggested that Titlacauan was executed in secret, away from the public eye because the god he represented symbolized immortal beauty and the eternal youth negating the laws of time. Even after the sacrifice the sexual undercurrent of Toxcatl was present during the ceremony: the boys and the girls from cloisters joined together to celebrate their youth with song and dance. After the performance they were allowed to leave the sacred premise, and their year-long duty was completed. They were finally allowed to reach social and sexual maturity because from that moment they were permitted to marry.

Clendinnen stated that the *ixiptla* of Titlacauan was an emblem of youthful manhood detached from the mainstream of the community: he had no family, no relationships, no affections or affiliations. Even after assuming the role of a warrior he was not directly involved with violence; he was an Aztec warrior in name only, an ideal representation and a dreamlike figure. His death was removed from public awareness. The opposite can be said about the *ixiptla* of Ixteucale-Tlacauepan. His attire, his actions and his death were meant to contradict everything that Titlacauan represented and create his dark counterpart: Ixteucale-Tlacauepan was dressed in modest garments resembling the clothes of primitive Chichimec hunters-gatherers. He led the people to the serpent dance of warriors and faced his death publicly. The visual conflict between elegant, mild and beautiful Titlacauan, praised and cherished by his followers, and poorly clad, violent and savage Ixteucale-Tlacauepan could have represented various roles played by an Aztec male: careful suppression of violence in the daily life as well as unleashing the “active”, primitive side during war campaigns.

In Clendinnen’s opinion, the *ixiptla* was not only the symbol of Tezcatlipoca, but of his victim as well. His death symbolized the universal subjugation to Tezcatlipoca, whose nature is realized in the destruction of his servant at the height of social bliss. Tezcatlipoca possessed the power to create a being of pure perfection, to destroy it and to replicate it at his will; he was the epitome of inexhaustible fickleness and a reminder of human fragility and vulnerability.²²⁸

²²⁸ Ibid., p.148

2.8. Michel Graulich

The issue of whether or not the Mesoamerican calendars included leap years was the subject of considerable and long scholarly debate. Michel Graulich rejected the idea that the *xiuhpohualli* calendar included intercalations because he found the information in 16th-century sources unsatisfactory and speculative.²²⁹ He stated that the lack of intercalations and the permanent correlation of both ceremonial calendars (*xiuhpohualli* and *tonalpohualli*), which were synchronized and started at the same day every 52 years, resulted in a considerable shift in the placement of *veintenas*. Any interference with the calendric system would have ultimately disrupted the count of days and would have prevented the calendars from interconnecting after the cycle was completed. To avoid such problem, no leap year was introduced.

Graulich analyzed the differences between the dates of the *veintenas* in various codices and he concluded that most of them resulted from the lack of leap year: the months shifted a day every four years. According to his calculations, in 1519 the *veintenas* already shifted 209 days from their original position, which was set up between the years 680 and 683.²³⁰ Not only did he confirm the date of the origin of the Mesoamerican calendar

²²⁹ Graulich 1986:19-34; 1999: 63-85.

²³⁰ Graulich decided that the *veintenas* should first be “reordered and correspond directly to the astronomical and meteorological events they originally were connected to. After shifting the *veintenas* and correlating them to the appropriate seasons, Graulich proposed that the original time in which Toxcatl was celebrated fell in December – in the middle of the dry season in the Valley of Mexico. Graulich calculated how many days were left between the beginning of the *veintenas* in 1519 and the “original position” that he proposed, and he came up with the difference of 209 days. Following this logic, he multiplied the number of “shifted days” times 4 (due to the lack of intercalation each year one day was “lost”). 836 is the number of years which separated the year 1519 from the moment when the calendar had not yet been influenced by the intercalary “calculation error”. The difference would equal 680-683 (approximation suggested by Graulich himself). To follow his calculations see: Graulich 1999: 74-79.

through astronomic observation and mathematic deduction, but he also proved that the *veintenas* were initially strongly connected to the seasons and various agricultural activities.

Provided the results of this investigation were true, the position of Toxcatl would change dramatically. The feast was believed to be called “the drought”, although it was celebrated in the beginning of the rainy season; after repositioning it by 209 days it would coincide with the middle of the dry season between November 29 and December 12. It would also prove a theory that the *veintenas* were indeed connected to the seasons and to major astronomical events, at least in the very beginning of the calendar’s existence.

Graulich clarified that Toxcatl did not include any references to mythological events and that it was not supposed to reenact a myth. His interpretation of the feast was based on the general context of the *veintenas*, their connection to the seasons, and the attributes of Tezcatlipoca. Graulich related Toxcatl to a parallel feast of Quecholli, which coincided with the summer solstice and stated that the last days of Toxcatl, as positioned in 682 (December 18), corresponded with the winter solstice, the longest night of the year. In the scholar’s opinion, the winter solstice symbolized the danger of burning down the world by the Sun, which reached its highest point on the sky and through the death and rebirth of Tezcatlipoca the catastrophe had been prevented once again. Incensing the houses and temples during Toxcatl could have also symbolized establishing a protective layer of clouds/smoke

in order to shield the world from the scorching Sun. Toxcatl was also a festival of abundance, purification and pardon of sins.

After analyzing the rites of other *veintenas*, namely Quecholli and Panquetzaliztli, Graulich reached a conclusion that the Aztecs substituted Quetzalcoatl with Huitzilopochtli during some festivals. He had no doubt that Toxcatl was originally dedicated to Quetzalcoatl, even prevailing over Tezcatlipoca. Based on the relation in *Primeros Memoriales*, he linked the patron god of merchants Yacatecuhtli to Quetzalcoatl, in order to confirm his hypothesis. The mythological conflict between Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca could have been reflected in the drama of solstices and the repeated triumph of Sun over death and night.

According to Graulich, the place of the sacrifice was related to astronomy: the shrine in the Chalco region was situated south-east from Tenochtitlan, exactly in the direction that the Sun headed during the winter solstice.

2.9. Guilhem Olivier

In his comprehensive monograph of Tezcatlipoca Olivier investigated the relation between the *tlatoani* and the divine representative, the significance of the flute and music during Toxcatl, and the myths that were possibly associated with the *veintena*.²³¹ He was convinced that the seclusion of the ruler during the final days of Toxcatl was caused by the fact that the *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca actually substituted for the ruler on the sacrificial stone;

²³¹ Olivier 2004: 341-409.

according to Olivier, the *tlatoani* was the one ritually sacrificed during the *veintena*.

The *Florentine Codex* provided a description of the new *tlatoani*'s inauguration and the speeches held during the ceremony: the ruler is repeatedly addressed to as “the flute” of Tezcatlipoca and his representative on the mortal plane.²³² Olivier suggested that the ruler shared the *mana* of Tezcatlipoca in the similar way his *ixiptla* did and therefore the latter was able to replace him symbolically in the moment of the sacrifice.²³³ The *mana* of the *tlatoani* was hence restored and his claim to power had been legitimized and renewed once again.

Olivier pointed out that perforated wind instruments had frequently helped summon up the gods and encourage them to descend from the sky during rituals. The flute or other type of wind instrument (e.g.: a pipe or a shell) was a means of communication with the divine and of inauguration of a chant, a prayer or invocation. The symbolic flute breaking at the steps of the temple pyramid during Toxcatl symbolized the breach of contact between the Aztecs and their god; the representative anticipated his death and somewhat “united” himself with the flute – the demise of the *ixiptla* and the breaking of flutes signified breach of communication, a moment of terror and chaos. The order had been restored directly after the breach through the choice of a new *ixiptla*. Tezcatlipoca was reborn, the ruler was reborn, the living image was

²³² Sahagūn 1950-1982: VI: 19.

²³³ The term was used by Olivier to express the concept of an impersonal force or quality of supernatural origin that resides in people, animals, and inanimate objects; the concept had been created and shared by some of the indigenous Pacific islander peoples (for example the Polynesians, Maoris, and Melanesians).

reborn, and the communication lines with the sphere of sacrum were reestablished.

3.0. Conclusions

The purpose of this chapter was a systematic review of modern sources and theories dealing with the origin and significance of Toxcatl. The selected hypotheses reflect on the problems with the interpretation of the *veintena* and demonstrate the vast plethora of possible explanations: various approaches to the subject expose the complexity and multi-faceted structure of the feast, which defies traditional, singular clarification and opens channels to debate whenever a new theory is suggested.

The biggest problem with correct interpretation stems from the fact that the entire state-of-the-art knowledge of the *veintenas* and their descriptions was based on an assumption that the festivals, celebrated in various cities, villages and regions with radically different ethnic structure and cultural heritage and tradition, possessed the same universal meaning and signified the same thing for different groups of people.

The disparities between the descriptions of Toxcatl in the 16th-century sources lead to a different conclusion: Toxcatl was not permanently attached to the solar calendar and the tropical year, its date could have changed. Various communities, depending on their social and economic character, focused on different aspects of the *veintena*. Even though the scholars were perfectly aware that the post-Conquest descriptions of Toxcatl were provided by the informants from various places and social groups, they still

considered the festival as an event with an invariable “core” denotation shared by all Aztec communities.

This assumption had been proven entirely wrong and the evidence for it lays in the 16th-century descriptions: each of the relations depicted and analyzed in Chapter 2 included alternative sets of ritual components, sometimes so radically different from one another, that they could have belonged to another feast as well. Such disparities were a consequence of the distinct socio-political, economical and ethnic characteristics of the places in which the aforementioned celebrations were set. Agrarian communities focused on the aspects related to the change of seasons, harvest, meteorological and astronomical phenomena – the factors that had direct influence on their daily lives. More urbanized areas, such as Tenochtitlan, Texcoco or Tlatelolco, detached from the direct connection to the agrarian cycle due to its shift to crafts, high social stratification and political complexity, tended to concentrate on other issues: legitimacy of power, political and economic expansion, etc.

Such discrepancy should not be surprising since similar situation can be found nowadays all around the world: the contrast between complex theological thought usually reserved for the limited circles of intelligentsia and religious hierarchy, and the so-called “folk religion” based on group participation in the rituals and attributed mainly to rural communities. Big Aztec cities, with their ritual centers and priest schools, stimulated the development of religious contemplation; religious concepts were shifting from the verbatim to the abstract.

Considering that Toxcatl could not have symbolized the same thing for all communities which celebrated it, some theories mentioned previously in this chapter could be viable, provided that the character of the community is taken into account. The following chapters focus on the differences between the communities mentioned in the 16th-century Toxcatl descriptions, and attempt to assign the interpretation to the location.

CHAPTER 4

AZTEC RITUAL IN THEORY AND PRACTICE – THE TOXCATL FEAST OUTSIDE TENOCHTITLAN

1.0. Foreword

The first part of the following chapter consists of a brief introduction to the selected theories on the ritual in general, the ritual performance, and the idiosyncrasy of the Aztec rites. These theories were selected based on their relevance to the study of the Toxcatl feast and their universal applicability. In order to explain extensively and profusely the intricacy of the Aztec ceremonial life, the fundamental terms such as the rite of passage and liminality must be explained.

The second part of the chapter focuses on the chosen issues regarding specific social relations within the Aztec Empire. This part describes the significance of the regional variations in the 16th-century Toxcatl descriptions, as well as the correlation between these variations and the characteristics of a described region. It will also analyze the hybridization process within the Aztec Empire before the Spanish conquest, as well as the syncretic nature of the Toxcatl ceremony observed outside large urban centers.

There are two known descriptions of Toxcatl in which the festival did not take place in Tenochtitlan: Bernardino de Sahagún's *Primeros Memoriales* and the *Codex Borbonicus*. These two locations are:

1. The *chinampas* surrounding Xochimilco - a rural, agricultural area within the Valley of Mexico; according to historical sources, it had been conquered by Tenochtitlan in the 15th century.
2. Tepepulco - a provincial city-state with a long recorded tradition; situated in considerable distance from Tenochtitlan but still considered a part of the “core provinces” of the Aztec Empire.

The chapter will be closed with preliminary conclusions. The next chapter will be entirely dedicated to the description and analysis of the Toxcatl ceremony in Tenochtitlan.

2.0. Notes on the definition and the function of a ritual

The definition of a ritual and its significance for the community is the subject of the academic debate since the beginnings of anthropological studies. Initially, rituals were believed to be re-enactment of myths; they helped the community to understand and “tame” the nature through performance and repetition. They helped explain natural processes (e.g.: the change of seasons) and accompanied practically every social activity in hunter gatherer societies as well as in the agricultural communities.

Arnold van Gennep’s theory on the rites of passage and the concept of liminality had major influence on the research of other prominent scholars such as Victor Turner and Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah.²³⁴ According to van Gennep, liminality is a metaphysical state of being in between two planes of existence; it refers to “in-between situations” and conditions that are

²³⁴ van Gennep 2004.

characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty regarding the continuity of tradition and future outcomes.²³⁵

Liminality resulted from the three-phased structure of the ritual, in this case a rite of passage (which van Gennep considered to be the most popular type of a ritual):

1. the preliminal phase – involving a metaphorical death of a participant, marked by his temporary separation from the community,
2. the liminal phase – the transition from the previously established order to a new one through the creation of a *tabula rasa*, and the removal of previously taken-for-granted forms and limits. In this phase the rite must follow a strictly defined sequence under the supervision and authority of a master of the ceremony (for example a priest). Its destructive character, manifested through the removal of norms, helps the society change or confirm its identity and trespass the metaphysical threshold, hence leaving the sphere of liminality,
3. the postliminal phase – the unit which was previously separated or symbolically destroyed is reincorporated to the community under new identity.²³⁶

Victor Turner addressed van Gennep's concepts of liminality and ritual structure in his works on the anthropology of performance and the structure

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid.

of a ritual.²³⁷ He introduced a four-staged model of a ritual as a means to process a social drama:

1. breach of norm
2. ensuing crisis
3. redressing initiatives
4. resolution marked by either reintegration or schism

The following structure can be observed in the last stages of the Toxcatl performance in Tenochtitlan: it is characterized by the symbolical breach of communication between the sphere of gods and the mortal plane. The *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca ceremonially broke the flutes that he used during his performance, thus possibly marking the moment in which the contact between two planes of existence was disrupted. The cosmological order was destroyed and the world of mortals hanged on the brink of obliteration. In general, the time of liminality was considerably short, since it spanned between the gradual ascent of the divine representative to the top of the pyramid and his sacrificial death. In that short moment, the world had been kept between the sphere of order and that of total chaos and destruction.

Given that the Aztecs believed that their world was the fifth one, following the four previous worlds which were destroyed in violent circumstances, the liminality during Toxcatl was probably considered potentially dangerous, similarly to the feast of the New Fire – a ceremony marking the passage of the 52-year-cycle and posing a threat of the universal collapse.

²³⁷ Turner 1967, 1986, 2008.

In case of Toxcatl, the redressing initiatives mentioned by Turner seemed to include the sacrificial killing of the divine representative and the simultaneous election of his successor, who was integrated into the society and was prepared to fulfill his ritual obligations. After he had been officially appointed as the next *ixiptla*, the order of things was restored and the communication between the gods and mortals was reestablished; it could have taken place in the exact moment that he played his flute for the very first time, although there is no mention of such ceremony in the 16th-century sources.

Turner investigated the impact of the social drama and rituals on the individual as well as on the entire community, the reaction to the dissolving of the identity and the impending crisis, which abolished the norms. He noted that the very structure of the society was temporarily suspended; the state of liminality was never meant to last for a longer period of time because it exerted too much stress on the community and could not endure without being stabilized by social structure.

Turner suggested that in liminality the social hierarchy was breached and the customary differences between classes, castes or groups within the society were no longer important. The social structure of *communitas* was formed – the one based on humanity and universal equality rather than social hierarchy. *Communitas* could produce positive values, such as the sense of fellowship and undifferentiated social relations, although they were bound to be short-lived.

Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah made interesting observations on the role of social structure in ritual performances and the transformation of the ritual itself through time and space.²³⁸ He defined ritual as a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication, constituted of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts often expressed in multiple media. The content and the arrangement of the ritual are characterized in varying degree by formality (conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition).²³⁹

Tambiah pointed out that ritual performance undergoes changes in emphasis in space and time – it is difficult to understand ritual by focusing exclusively on form or content. Rituals are always linked to status claims and to the interests of the participants; therefore they are always open to contextual meanings. Rituals are not designed to express the intentions, emotions, and states of mind of individual in a direct, spontaneous, and natural way. Their performative character is based on the notion that they not only convey semantic meanings from the cosmology, but also index socio-political hierarchies within the community: they enable the society to realize these structures and they legitimize them through constant repetition.²⁴⁰

Michael E. Smith analyzed the impact of the Aztec *veintenas* on the society in his work on the Aztec city-states.²⁴¹ He claimed that the *veintena* ceremonies were examples of civic rituals, events which drew people out of

²³⁸ Tambiah 1985.

²³⁹ Ibid., p. 128.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Smith 2008.

their households and kin groups, and into participation in the wider world of civic life. The public participation of people from all walks of life in these events generated social solidarity and integration across urban society. Common participation in public ritual events was therefore a powerful means of forging political identity and social solidarity. At the same time, the *veintena* ceremonies reinforced social class differences and made the power of the state visible. Distinctions between the nobles and the commoners were clearly marked at all times and the entire ceremonies were orchestrated by priests, who could be regarded as agents of the *tlatoani*. *Veintena* ceremonies served as mechanisms for linking the public and the private life together into an integrated urban social experience. These ceremonies created explicit connections between the domestic ritual and the state religion. Domestic rituals duplicated the public state ceremonies conducted by priests.²⁴²

Johanna Broda made a valuable remark in her articles on the connections between the social stratification and Aztec ritual performances. She suggested that the *veintena* ceremonies demonstrated the ritually sanctioned power of the king. The participation of different social groups in the cult exposed the economic and political inequality, at the same time assigning each group its place within the society.²⁴³

3.0. The Aztec Empire – the center versus the province

In order to fully understand the significance of the Toxcatl ritual and its impact on the communities which celebrated it (as presented in the 16th-

²⁴² Ibid., p. 170-171.

²⁴³ Broda 1976, 1979.

century sources) some general remarks on the differences between the life conditions in the Aztec metropolis and the province must be made.

The Aztec Empire was a multiethnic, multilingual organism which consisted of many diverse administrative units on various stages of political and economic development. Since the foundation of the Triple Alliance around 1428 until its dramatic downfall in 1521, the territorial expansion and the economic growth based on the tributary relations established between the Aztec center and the subdued provinces had been the principal goal and focus of this political organization. Each of the three core city-states - Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tlacopan - controlled its own dependent cities and tributary provinces.

In many cases after the victorious military campaign the Triple Alliance allowed the local ruling classes to keep their social position in exchange for willing cooperation. Their ties to the center were reinforced through tribute and arranged marriages between the members of the local elite and daughters of Aztec noble houses. The leaders of the Aztec Empire focused mainly on gaining the military and the economic dominance in their region; they made relatively small effort to impose their culture, religion or language on the subjugated peoples. This apparent leniency could have resulted from the empire's rapid expansion rate: the social and cultural changes may have not kept up with the territorial ones.

Although this hypothesis is possible, there are no clear indications in the precolonial sources suggesting that the Triple Alliance ever intended to culturally homogenize its territory. Whether the core cities wished to

construct a collective “imperial identity” based on chosen cultural traits, common language or religious cults, remains a speculative question. Until the Spanish Conquest, the Aztec Empire remained a loose confederation of various administrative organisms. Some of them had little contact with the center, apart from the tributary relations, while others enjoyed close cultural, economic and social ties – like exchanging the gifts between the rulers and the mercantile relations.

Due to the favorable geographic location and the skillful usage of different cultivation techniques, some regions – like the Basin of Mexico – enjoyed high level of political and social integration combined with dense population, whereas other areas - usually mountainous – were sparsely inhabited and not as highly organized, since they could not provide sufficient, stable quantity of harvest to nourish a bigger community. These arid regions were frequently inhabited by non-Nahua groups such as the Otomis and the Yopis.²⁴⁴

Economic organization of the Aztec Empire had been regulated by politics. It was a structure of dominance defined through the existence of following social classes: the nobility (*pipiltin*) that controlled the means of production, and the tribute-paying working class dependent economically and politically of the nobility.²⁴⁵ The latter consisted of two different subgroups:

1. *macehualtin*: commoners belonging to the *calpulli* - the organizational unit in the Aztec city. They were represented by a chosen council of

²⁴⁴ The term Yopi referred to the inhabitants of Yopitzinco and it was used by the Aztecs to describe the Tlapanec people, an ethnic group indigenous to the place which is located in the modern-day Mexican state of Guerrero.

²⁴⁵ Broda and Carrasco 1973: 45.

elders and were permitted to own a parcel of land, which could be transferred further as inheritance. *Macehualtin* were expected to cultivate the parcels belonging to the nobles or to the *tlatoani* himself. They were free to leave their *calpulli*, but it meant losing their privileges. Many commoners living in the city were farmers, who simply had to walk to their fields every morning.

Macehualtin had more in common with their rural counterparts as with the urban nobility. Urbanites had more opportunities to interact with the foreigners (such as the merchants) and with kings and nobles. They were required to participate in public works (e.g.: in the construction or renovation of palaces, temples, aqueducts and roads), but they also enjoyed various forms of recreation, such as ballgames or observing public ceremonies.²⁴⁶

2. Rural tenants – *mayeque*. They provided the rapidly expanding private lands of nobility with workforce. Many of them were forced to leave their native villages due to a war conflict or hunger; in consequence, they lost the privileges reserved for the members of the *calpulli* while their lands were redistributed as private possessions among the conquerors. *Mayeque* had no formal organization and they paid their tribute to individual local nobles. They could not travel freely nor leave the parcel of land to which they were assigned. However, their children were able to inherit the right to cultivate the parcel.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁶ Smith 2008.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

Agriculture served as the material foundation for the Aztec Empire. Several agricultural products were uniformly produced throughout the area encompassed by the empire: maize, beans, squash, chia, amaranth and chilies. Other food products and nonfood crops were adapted to special environment; cacao, fruits and cotton could be grown only in tropical areas. In the lower elevations, two crops of maize a year were often possible; but in the higher elevations, such as the Basin of Mexico, only one crop per year was the norm – and even that could fail because of droughts or early frost.²⁴⁸

Techniques for cultivating fell into two broad categories: fallowing and irrigation. In some cases, these techniques were supplemented by the used of terracing, crop rotation and fertilizers. The most intensive forms of irrigation were the *chinampas* – highly productive plots of land claimed from the shallow beds of freshwater lakes: they rose about one meter above water level. The *chinampas* were constructed by piling alternating layers of vegetation and mud in shallow areas of the lakes.²⁴⁹

The subdued regions were forced to pay tribute to the cities of the Triple Alliance; it was an economic strategy limiting communication and trade between outlying polities, making them dependent on the imperial center for the acquisition of luxury goods. The heaviest burden of the tribute assessment fell on the provincial commoners. Some toiled on state fields or *calpulli* lands to cultivate the enormous quantities of food demanded in tribute. Other commoners expended a sizeable share of their surpluses to purchase needed goods in local and regional marketplaces or from

²⁴⁸ Berdan 2005: 20-28.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

professional travelling merchants. Cotton was widely produced in lowland areas, but vast quantities of finished cotton textiles were received by the Triple Alliance as a tribute from the non-tropical provinces.²⁵⁰

Although the remote provinces were the predominant contributors to imperial tribute payments, they received little in return – usually a promise of assistance in case of famine or military aggression. The commoners situated close to the Triple Alliance were favored since they paid their tribute in labor, such as the construction of hydraulic works; they also profited from the increased crop productivity. The commoners served the state as warriors; some of them could improve their social standing and economic situation by active participation in military campaigns, which would be awarded during the redistribution of the spoils of war. In general, it can be said that the Aztec state had little interest in investing in the people or the resources from the distant regions.²⁵¹

4.0. Problems of the Aztec solar calendar *xiuhpohualli*

The interpretation of the *xiuhpohualli* festivals poses numerous difficulties due to the fact that the primary sources often provide inconsistent data. A concise review of these problems had been presented by Johanna Broda in her doctoral dissertation.²⁵² Broda pointed out frequent mistakes made by the researchers who analyzed the calendar systems and she suggested a thorough revision of preexisting assumptions. These problems are as follows:

²⁵⁰ Smith 1997:176-182.

²⁵¹ Berdan 2005: 42.

²⁵² Broda 1969.

4.1. European influences

The 16th-century primary sources on the Aztec calendar show a considerable level of European influence. Their authors interviewed indigenous people who had already been submitted to foreign influences, whereas their own faith, rituals, customs and calendar festivals had been prohibited by the colonial authorities. It is important to note that the only people with a profound and intimate understanding of the Aztec calendar and religion were the members of priesthood and nobility – a group which ranks were greatly diminished during the Spanish conquest. The common folk could only describe what they understood or heard from someone else; these information was strongly influenced by superstitions and speculation.

Those members of the indigenous population of central Mexico which survived the conquest and the epidemics that decimated their ranks had often been forced to relocate to other regions to repopulate them. They had been separated from their kin and their tribesmen; this meant that they could not preserve their traditional customs in their original form. The remaining “knowledgeable” individuals combined their wisdom with that of other “knowledgeable” displaced people; sometimes they incorporated their beliefs in Christian rituals in order to preserve them during the evangelization process. The result was a very high degree of cultural hybridization – a random mixture of indigenous and European elements in the culture of the early colonial Mexico. Broda argued that this process, together with the communication problems between the members of various tribes, ethnic groups, and cultural traditions, could be responsible for the

differences in the descriptions of the calendar festivals found in the primary sources.²⁵³

4.2. The veintenas and their variants

Various primary sources give different names for the months of the *xiuhpohualli* calendar. In some cases the authors informed the reader of the geographical variant, its origin, and popularity. According to Alfonso Caso, who investigated this issue and compared the names of the *veintenas* mentioned in various sources, Toxcatl was no exception.²⁵⁴ The festival was known under numerous names, depending on the place. In Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, Tepepulco, Tecciztlan, Huichapan, and Tlaxcala it was called Toxcatl; in Teotitlan it was Tepopochtli; in Metitlan it was known as Popochtli.²⁵⁵

Although the case of Toxcatl had been well documented, in many other cases the geographical origin and distribution of the festival names are not explained.

4.3. The timing of the festival

According to Broda, there was sufficient evidence in the primary sources to prove that the festivals were celebrated on the twentieth day of each month instead of the first, as sometimes suggested.²⁵⁶

²⁵³ Broda 1969: 26, 31.

²⁵⁴ Caso 1958.

²⁵⁵ Caso 1958, Appendix, table II.

²⁵⁶ Broda 1969: 33.

4.4. The beginning of the year

Broda argued that the beginning of the *xiuhpohualli* calendar year had been celebrated on different days, depending on the location within the Aztec Empire.²⁵⁷ According to Alfonso Caso, various communities started their calendar count with different months of the *xiuhpohualli*.²⁵⁸ Paul Kirchhoff pointed out that the Book XII of the *Florentine Codex* had been based on the traditions of both Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco, and it described two unsynchronized calendar systems starting with different months, even though the cities were immediate neighbors.²⁵⁹

4.5. The position of the *nemontemi*

Most of the primary sources indicate that the 5 additional days which completed the calendric count of 365 days (called *nemontemi*) fell to the end of the year. Therefore they would be placed between the last and the first month of the solar year. Since different months were proposed as the beginning of the year, the locations of the *nemontemi* could have varied accordingly.²⁶⁰

4.6. The problem of the intercalations and the agrarian calendar

The issue of intercalations in the Aztec calendars had been extensively analyzed by Michel Graulich who suggested that Mesoamerican astronomers did not use leap years to correlate the 365-day year with the true length of the solar year. He explained that such interference would disrupt the

²⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 36.

²⁵⁸ Caso 1958

²⁵⁹ Kirchhoff 1954

²⁶⁰ Broda 1969: 34-35.

balance between the 260-day calendar and the 365-day one.²⁶¹ If the count had been corrected, both calendars would be able to complete the cycle of 52 years; their starting points would not have been able to coincide after that completing that period. The omission of the intercalations in the solar calendar would have caused the shift between the festivals and the seasons.

In her doctoral dissertation Johanna Broda proposed the direction which was followed 20 years later by Michel Graulich. She stated that the correspondence between the agrarian calendar and the *xiuhpohualli* was possible and she explained that due to the lack of intercalations the *veintenas* shifted from their original position and did not represent the seasonal cycle anymore. The remaining correspondence of the monthly festivals to the natural cycle became more indirect. The primary concern with fertility and prosperity of the crops, which was the purpose of the agrarian calendar, had been transformed and expressed indirectly through the veneration of the deities selected for a given month while the societies organized in villages transformed into politically and economically complex ones.²⁶²

5.0. Descriptions of the Toxcatl celebrations – research questions

Certain elements of the Toxcatl festival are mentioned in more than one work (e.g.: the sacrifice of the male victim, incensing, molding of amaranth dough images, the Toxcatl dance), while others were mentioned only once or twice (e.g.: penance and self-mutilation during the festival occurring in four-year

²⁶¹ Graulich 1986, 1999.

²⁶² Broda 1969: 52-53.

intervals). According to Johanna Broda, the differences in oral traditions and the portrayal of the calendar festivals between the Mexican cities resulted from the process of hybridization of the indigenous beliefs with the European tradition, weak communication between the provinces and cities during the first phase of Spanish colonization, and the influence of more popular beliefs on the recorded material. The dynamic social and political changes in the 16th-century Mexico further fueled this process.²⁶³

The purpose of this dissertation is the attempt to prove that the variations between the descriptions of the Toxcatl festival in the 16th-century sources were not a matter of coincidence or merely a by-product of the hybridization process. The discrepancies between the descriptions could have resulted from the fact that various communities chose different elements of the Toxcatl festival to celebrate their own cultural heritage. The fact that the rituals and the occurrence of ritual actors were not standardized within the core provinces of the Aztec Empire did not necessarily prove that the informants were confused or too heavily influenced by the European culture. The Toxcatl festival descriptions illustrate a different process – the hybridization of culture before the Spanish conquest, free from the European influence.

These regional variations indicate the existence of various local cults on the territories which were later described in the Spanish primary sources; cults which characterized a given city, a town or an area before it had been submitted to the Aztec rule. Some of them reflected on the idiosyncrasies of a particular city: its ethnic makeup, its social structure or the main sector of

²⁶³ Broda 1969

the local economy. These idiosyncrasies were not the result of the European contact; they were shaped throughout the centuries before the emergence of the Triple Alliance.

Since the festivals in Tenochtitlan described in detail by Sahagún and Durán usually required participation of the ruler, they were always connected to the political power, and since Tenochtitlan was one of the centers of the Triple Alliance and the Aztec Empire, the character of these feasts tended to transcend the locality and take a more universal form. Although this highly developed urban culture did not forget its humble beginnings, it travelled a long way from the hunter-gatherer tribe that established its first settlement on the Lake Texcoco; the festivals of the *xiuhpohualli* calendar referred to the agrarian rites but the city itself redefined its own heritage and rewrote its history to better serve its goals.²⁶⁴

Other, smaller cities managed to keep the references to their original heritage in the festivals of the Aztec ceremonial calendar since they were not occupied with the display of political power or the artificial construction of their identity. The cities which did not belong to the core provinces of the Aztec Empire stood a good chance of keeping and maintaining their cults. Apparently, the cultural integration of the conquered territories was not a top priority of the Triple Alliance. It seems that its main concern was the political and economic integration of the areas closest to the main Aztec

²⁶⁴ According to some sources, Itzcoatl (the ruler of Tenochtitlan 1427-1440) together with his chief political advisor Tlacaelel ordered the destruction of the ancient codices containing historical accounts in order to establish an official version of the history of the Aztecs and to lay the foundation for a new national pride. In the words of Itzcoatl: "It is not wise that all the people should know the paintings. The common people would be driven to ruin and there would be trouble, because these paintings contain many lies (...)." Under the pretenses of suppressing the lies, the ruler created his own version of history, which gave the Aztecs a more glorious background (León-Portilla 1963:155).

cities (Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tlacopan) in order to assure stability and security.

The long-standing strategies of the Aztec imperialism consisted mostly of the economic goals (promoting trade and submitting newly acquired territories to the tribute system) and military goals (establishing military garrisons in the provinces that were considered problematic or were bordering enemy territory, and securing trade routes). The further from the core of the empire, the less were the Aztecs interested in imposing their culture and religion on other peoples. They did spread the cult of their patron god Huitzilopochtli outside the Valley of Mexico, but they did not change the local structures nor force the submitted peoples to adopt their institutions. In the remote provinces, they merely adopted already existing political structures: after a successful conquest of a given community, they usually left the local rulers in place if they assented to Aztec demands.²⁶⁵

In the core provinces of the empire, the Aztecs applied a specific political strategy in order to create a cohesive and well-integrated unit. They interfered with local political offices and positions, abolishing some of them, creating new, and transforming already existing posts. They also created separate hierarchies for political control and tribute administration. The political ties between the core cities were secured through marriage alliances between the members of the local elite and the noble families of Tenochtitlan.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁵ Berdan and Smith 1996; Smith 1996; Umberger 1996a, 1996b.

²⁶⁶ Berdan and Smith 1996

However, the religious aspect of the conquest in the core provinces was not as evident as the political and the economic ones. Apart from adapting the calendar festivals of the *xiuhpohualli* (not necessarily synchronized with the calendar count in Tenochtitlan, as seen in Tlatelolco) and including Huitzilopochtli in the ranks of the deities honored in the calendar, it seems that the provinces were not forced to give up their local cults and customs. The significant exception was made for the cities and provinces which actively resisted Aztec dominance and were forcibly subjugated; in such cases the patron gods of the rebels were taken prisoner and transported to Tenochtitlan as part of the punishment.²⁶⁷

The following subchapters are going to illustrate the attributes of Toxcatl celebration in two areas which had been politically subjected to the Aztec Empire as a result of a territorial conquest, and which participated in the tributary system. Both of them had a complex ethnic structure: they were inhabited by people of Aztec and non-Aztec origin who spoke different languages and who cultivated their own traditions. Both of these communities incorporated their local deities into the Toxcatl ritual in order to emphasize their heritage and express the values which were essential to their inhabitants. As a result of these syncretic practices, Toxcatl was transformed into a feast which defined the key factors of the socio-economic particularity of a given urban unit, and enabled this unit to appreciate its uniqueness. The Toxcatl festival was far from a merely histrionic celebration

²⁶⁷ Brundage 1985

– it underwent numerous variations and adapted to the local demands in order to answer the needs and expectations of its participants.

The description and the analysis in the following subchapters focuses on the ethnographic data gathered in places which belonged to the central provinces of the Aztec Empire – the Valley of Mexico and the areas adjacent to it. As far as these provinces were concerned, the political centers of Tenochtitlan and Texcoco intended to integrate them and transform them into an interdependent core zone through political marriages between the members of the local and metropolitan elite, and through exerting direct control over the local politics.²⁶⁸ The latter was based on substitution of the local ruler with the representative of the royal families of Tenochtitlan and Texcoco. Since both Tepepulco and Xochimilco were Texcocan and Mexica (Tenochtitlan) dependencies respectively, Tlacopan (the third founding member of the Triple Alliance) will not be mentioned here. The descriptions of Toxcatl festival in these places indicates that despite the geopolitical situation and the intensified Aztec integration efforts, Xochimilco and Tepepulco managed to include their local cults in the Aztec calendar feasts, and they took active part in the hybridization process.

5.1. Toxcatl in the agricultural areas of the central Aztec Empire

In his work Henry Bigger Nicholson suggested a hypothesis (supported by Christopher Couch) that the depictions of the Aztec calendar festivals in the *Codex Borbonicus* are based on the information recorded in the Xochimilco

²⁶⁸ Hodge 1996

region.²⁶⁹ The colorful images of gods and rituals do not describe the *veintenas* in Tenochtitlan as it had been previously thought, since the author reveals his intimate knowledge of the daily life in the rural areas and it pays significant attention to the life of common people.

Nicholson's theory is very convincing and highly probable; the depictions of the festivals in the *Codex Borbonicus* are considered to be the earliest post-conquest/early colonial sources on the Aztec ritual and are not influenced by the works of Sahagún and Durán. The information gathered much later by those two Spanish friars served as a comparative material to the researchers who analyzed the *Codex Borbonicus*. A mistake made and repeated by some authors lies in their assumption that the codex had been prepared in Tenochtitlan or at least referred to its festivals, whereas the real Tenochtitlan-based works of Sahagún and Durán were merely a point of reference. In fact the depiction of festivals and the occurrence of deities to whom these festivals were dedicated clearly shows that the codex described another place; based on the character of these festivals and the associations of the deities (the patron goddess of the city of Xochimilco - Cihuacoatl and the lake god Atlahua) it can be deduced that this area was in fact the Xochimilco region. Since the *Codex Borbonicus* dedicated considerable amount of space to the agricultural references, it may have been recorded in the *chinampa* area.

The native historical sources on the Valley of Mexico usually begin their narrative in the period after the fall of the Toltec civilization in the twelfth century CE. A political vacuum which emerged after the collapse of the

²⁶⁹ Couch 1984; Nicholson 1974b.

Toltec culture provided various wandering tribes with an opportunity to enter the valley and to establish permanent settlements close to the natural resources. The surviving Toltec groups spread throughout the Valley but their political importance was minimal.

The Xochimilca were the first group of the wandering Chichimec tribes that entered and settled in the Valley of Mexico. Their territory stretched from the southern bank of the lake Xochimilco to the mountain ridge of Sierra Ajusco.²⁷⁰ According to the *Anales de Cuauhtitlan*, the city of Xochimilco was established in the year 1 Tochtli which most probably corresponds with 1227 CE.²⁷¹ Xochimilco was divided into three autonomous units of Olac, Tepetenchi, and Tecpan; its advantageous position enabled it to use the lake system for transportation of goods from more remote regions to Tenochtitlan.

The archaeological evidence shows that the Chalco-Xochimilco lake system was densely populated in the fourteenth and fifteenth century. Its major cities – Chalco, Xochimilco and Culhuacan had respectively 12 500, 15 000 and 4 000 inhabitants. The majority of the local population was entirely dependent on the *chinampa* cultivation, which also provided the surplus of food destined for export.²⁷² The *chinampas*, floating man-made gardens, significantly increased the surface available for agriculture and provided the inhabitants of the Basin of Mexico with maize, tomatoes, chilies, squash, beans, chia, amaranth, and various types of edible herbs and flowers. These species were adapted to grow in humid climate of *chinampas* and were

²⁷⁰ Durán 1964: 10.

²⁷¹ *Anales de Cuauhtitlan* 1945: 16.

²⁷² Parsons 1993: 283.

cultivated in cycles. The so-called Chinampaneca area consisted of the floating gardens located on the lakes Xochimilco and Chalco, situated south of the great lake Texcoco. Both lakes were important sweet water reservoirs, replenished by the rivers streaming from the Sierra Nevada.

After the emergence of the Triple Alliance, Tenochtitlan directed its attention to the fertile *chinampa* region and soon provoked an armed conflict. Durán states that open hostilities were initiated by a group of Xochimilca inhabitants who attacked and robbed Mexica merchants travelling across their land.²⁷³ It is clear that Tenochtitlan desired the access to the natural resources, the additional labor for her state projects, and the control of the trade routes running across the Xochimilco area. The entire region had been conquered by the Triple Alliance forces commanded by Itzcoatl between 1429 and 1430.²⁷⁴

After the conquest, the state of Xochimilco had been converted to a dependency of Tenochtitlan, although the division into three autonomous units had been preserved. According to the Aztec history recorded by Durán, the three *tlatoani* seats had been given to Tenochcas.²⁷⁵ Submitted to the tributary system of the Triple Alliance, Xochimilco was required to provide Tenochtitlan with warriors, laborers for public work, and materials.²⁷⁶

The illustration depicting Toxcatl in the *Codex Borbonicus* includes images of four deities: Tezcatlipoca, Huitzilopochtli, Cihuacoatl and Atlahua. Cihuacoatl (“Snake Woman”) was the patron goddess of the island of

²⁷³ Durán 1964: 73-74.

²⁷⁴ Durán 1967: 105-106.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 516.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*; p. 111-117.

Cuitlahuac and the adjacent areas such as Xochimilco, Culhuacan and Chalco. She was traditionally affiliated with the Chinampaneca area. Cihuacoatl was known and venerated under many different names, which included Quilaztli (“Plant Creator”), Tonantzin (“Our Mother”), Cuauhcihuatl (“Eagle Woman”), and Yaocihuatl (“Warrior Woman”).²⁷⁷ Her cult was believed to have originated in Tollan (Tula) and introduced in the lake area by the neo-Toltec city of Culhuacan. The goddess was also associated with the Toltec nobility - her cult later helped the Mexica link their nobility to the glorious Toltec tradition.²⁷⁸ Apart from being connected to the Toltec cultural heritage, Cihuacoatl was the earth and fertility goddess influencing the growth of vegetation and representing the Chinampaneca as one of the biggest food producers in the Basin.²⁷⁹ Atlahua (“The Lord of the Water Edge”) was a deity of water, lakes, fishery and hunting, also associated with the Chinampaneca area.²⁸⁰

The occurrence of these two deities on the illustration depicting Toxcatl in the *Codex Borbonicus* supports the theory that the codex described the calendar festivals celebrated in the Chinampaneca area. According to Couch, the informants who provided the authors of the codex with details on the festivals possessed intimate knowledge of life in a small rural community and the cultural activities which accompanied it, which may indicate that some of them used to be indigenous priests from that area.²⁸¹

²⁷⁷ Quiñones Keber 2002: 105.

²⁷⁸ Gómez-Cano 2010: 181-182.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Quiñones Keber 2002: 107.

²⁸¹ Couch 1985: 39.

The Toxcatl ceremony portrayed in the *Codex Borbonicus* was known under an alternative name – Tepopochhuiliztli (“incensing”); the illustration depicting the festival presents a group of commoners facing a priest who is holding an incense burner. Another priest faces the four deities in similar fashion and offers incense to them. Copal – an aromatic tree resin - was and still is used for ceremonial purposes all around Mesoamerica; in the Aztec rituals copal incense had two principal functions: it was burned for purification (both for spiritual cleansing as well as for cleansing physical items) or it was offered to deities as nutrition since the Aztecs considered copal – “the blood of trees” – a divine equivalent of maize, the food for humans. It can be therefore deduced that the codex depicts both types of ritual copal use during the Toxcatl/Tepopochhuiliztli festival: the spiritual purification of participants as well as the symbolic food offering to four principal deities (who played an important role in the local politics and economy). Tezcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli represented the connection to the Triple Alliance, whereas Cihuacoatl and Atlahua represented the Chinampaneca area, the link to the Toltec heritage, agricultural fertility cult and the importance of water in agriculture.

The illustration in *Codex Borbonicus* does not provide any evidence that the depicted ritual took place in a major urban center – there are no architectural indications and no name glyphs that would suggest the precise geographic location of the place where the Toxcatl festival was performed. Taken into account that this pictorial screenfold was prepared as late as in the 16th century, when all of the significant cities of the Chalco province were already described in detail by authors such as Chimalpahin, the

character of the illustration may suggest that the *veintena* had been celebrated in some undisclosed rural setting. There are no clear references to important temples or to landscape highlights – the only reference to the location is the presence of the Chinampaneca deities – Cihuacoatl and Atlahua. Therefore the depiction of Toxcatl in the *Codex Borbonicus* could depict the celebration in a rural area.

Notably, the codex does not depict any human sacrifice during Toxcatl. There is no reference to the divine representative or any other form of *ixiptla*, such as the dough effigies or statues of Tezcatlipoca or Huitzilopochtli. The celebration was focused entirely on the incensing practices; this fact can be explained through the connection between the incense, nutrition and the completion of the agricultural cycle. It seems that the purpose of the feast was the celebration of abundance of nutrition and the expression of gratitude – the local inhabitants thanked the patron gods for their guidance and generosity by offering them food. The participants underwent a fumigation process as well in order to saturate the world with the divine presence and to cleanse themselves.

The cleansing aspect bears similarity to the practices described by Durán and to the ritual of penitence and redemption: in Tenochtitlan Tezcatlipoca played the part of the confessor and judge while his followers completed rites of self-mutilation, fasting and penance.²⁸² Correspondingly, the celebration in rural areas bore traits of penitential practices as well: the commoners let the priests ritually cleanse them of their faults in order to begin the new cycle with a clean slate (or simply to help them keep their transgressions

²⁸² Durán 1971

hidden from the rest of the community). Perhaps the incensing marked the end of one cultivation period and guaranteed that the sins of the people would not influence future harvest; Tezcatlipoca was widely known as a capricious and tricky god who toyed with human fate. The cleansing could have symbolized paying respect to Tezcatlipoca in order to prevent him from acting out vengeance.

In conclusion, the rituals depicted in the *Codex Borbonicus* could portray a typical Toxcatl celebration in a rural area of the Aztec Empire. It was deprived of the elaborated decorations and the carefully orchestrated ritual scenarios known from the descriptions from Tenochtitlan or Tlatelolco. It appeared to focus on the basic ceremonial activities – cleansing of the commoners and offering food to the gods which had a significant meaning to the community – the patron deities of Tenochtitlan and Chalco-Xochimilco lake area. The incense offering was a manner of thanking them for their generosity and providing the *chinampa* communities with future prosperity and abundance of nutrition, since cultivation was the main source of income and sustenance for the inhabitants of that area.

5.2. Toxcatl in Tepepulco - a provincial urban center

The description of the Toxcatl ceremony in Sahagún's *Primeros Memoriales* was based on the information acquired during interviews with the inhabitants of Tepepulco, a provincial city in the present-day state of Hidalgo.²⁸³ Archeological evidence indicates that during the Classic Period (ca. 200-900 CE) the site may have been a post on the mercantile “corridor”

²⁸³ Alternative spelling: Tepepolco, presently known as Tepeapulco.

between Teotihuacan and El Tajín or even the Gulf Coast.²⁸⁴ Situated a short distance northeast of the passage from the Teotihuacan Valley, Tepepulco used to be an important obsidian production center subject to Teotihuacan.

Due to the fact that iron was unknown in pre-Conquest Mesoamerica, obsidian was one of the most important natural resources; among others it was necessary for tools and weaponry production. Archeological data indicates that obsidian projectile points had been in use as early as 1500 BC. and that they were used for weapons production.²⁸⁵ The city of Teotihuacan owed its dominance to this resource: around 400 CE the city underwent a period of rapid economic growth due to the production and distribution of obsidian.²⁸⁶ In his work on obsidian production in the Aztec Empire Pastrana Cruz noted that during the period of Triple Alliance dominance a vast array of range and melee weapons was made of obsidian (arrows, dart throwers, spears, and maces); the resource was broadly distributed thanks to a well-developed production and trade network.²⁸⁷

In the Classic Era (early 600 CE) Tepepulco was the only city besides Teotihuacan known to import green obsidian from Navajas or produce implements of grey obsidian from Otumba (Otompan). Two major excavated obsidian workshops on the site were established as far as in the early phase of the Teotihuacan culture (ca. 150 BC).²⁸⁸

The population of Tepepulco was essentially trilingual at the time of the Spanish conquest: it was inhabited by Nahuatl, Otomi and “Chichimec”

²⁸⁴ Millon 1981: 223-224.

²⁸⁵ Hassig 1992: 15.

²⁸⁶ Hassig 1992: 45; Boehm de Lameiras 1980: 53.

²⁸⁷ Pastrana Cruz 2007

²⁸⁸ Millon 1981: 223-224.

speakers.²⁸⁹ The entire region had been conquered by the Tepanec empire prior to the foundation of the Triple Alliance, probably around 1416-1418.²⁹⁰ The alliance aided the exiled heir to the Texcoco throne Nezahualcoyotl in his successful cause.²⁹¹ After the fall of Azcapotzalco the newly-established coalition of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tlacopan divided the Tepanec territories among themselves; the Tepepulco area was subsequently absorbed by Texcoco.²⁹²

Although Tepepulco had not been a key player in the imperial politics, it enjoyed the prosperity resulting from the establishment of the Triple Alliance and its rise to power. It remained principally under the Texcocan sphere of influence and participated in the military expeditions, sending its warriors to battle in order to share the spoils of war. The cult of Huitzilopochtli, the deity of warfare, was popular in the city, even though the celebration of Toxcatl involved it rather marginally.²⁹³ The *Primeros Memoriales* indicated that Tepepulco used to be a significant provincial city; the description of the feasts of *veintenas* offers a valuable insight into the ceremonial life of a considerably large urban unit belonging to the Aztec cultural circle, although not exerting any significant influence on the culture itself. Tepepulco

²⁸⁹ Nicholson 1974

²⁹⁰ Nicholson 1974. The Tepanecs were a Chichimec tribe which settled on the western shore of the Lake Texcoco most probably in the early 13th century and took over Azcapotzalco from its original inhabitants to transform it into a powerful city-state. During the next 200 years they expanded their territory by military conquest and reached the height of their power under the rule of the *tlatoani* Tezozomoc (1370-1426). The so-called Tepanec empire dominated in the Valley of Mexico and subdued other political centers: Xochimilco, Chalco, Acolhuacan, Cuauhnahuac, and reaching as far north as Tollan. The Tepanecs had been defeated in 1428 by a coalition of their former subject-cities: Tenochtitlan, Texcoco and Tlacopan – the event that paved way for the future political hegemony of the Aztec Triple Alliance (Novillo 2006).

²⁹¹ Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1952: I: 217.

²⁹² Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1952: II: 169.

²⁹³ Nicholson 1974

remained a city at the sidetracks of history, focusing on its crafts and trade, participating dutifully in the war effort and territorial expansion, performing their rituals without getting directly involved in the main political theatre of the Triple Alliance. It was mainly focused on its own internal affairs and therefore could be considered a typical representative of an Aztec provincial city for the purpose of this dissertation.

The *Primeros Memoriales* described the differences in ritual and performance of Toxcatl observed in Tepepulco; the distinctions between the celebrations in Tepepulco and Tenochtitlan were clearly visible. The former tended to focus on the aspects which were significant from the community's point of view and did not involve lavish display of wealth or the carefully orchestrated sacrifice of the divine representative.

The figure of Yacatecuhtli, the patron deity of merchants, is an interesting addition to the ceremony of Toxcatl. His presence in the ritual could be explained by the fact that Tepepulco was well-known for obsidian production and commerce, since its economy was export-oriented. Merchants played a crucial role in the community and provided it with means to meet the demands of the tributary system, while connecting the city with the wide network of mercantile exchange and information. The well-being of the entire city depended on the outcome of external trade. Given such circumstances, the presence of the god of merchants during the festival which was supposed to celebrate the abundance of produce and nutrition is a logical consequence of the social structure of Tepepulco.

The description did not provide many details regarding the activities of Tezcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli during the celebration; the latter deity seems rather marginalized. This is not surprising, since Huitzilopochtli represented the Aztec Empire itself and had been elevated to the status of solar deity and patron god of Tenochtitlan as a result of its expansionist politics. Huitzilopochtli replaced other deities in many rituals so as to remind the followers of his changed status and the increasing power of Tenochtitlan. It is highly possible that the deity was not revered as vigorously outside the core of the Triple Alliance; its presence in various provincial rituals could have been enforced by Tenochtitlan but did not stem from the local tradition. Tepepulco provided the Triple Alliance with warriors to carry on their territorial expansion and therefore the figure of Huitzilopochtli was on frequent public display, representing imperial aspirations and relating to the warrior caste. However, its presence did not mean that the deity was widely regarded with such respect as it received in Tenochtitlan, especially among the communities with mixed ethnic origin and composition. Finally, Tepepulco remained principally Texcoco's dependency and was influenced heavier by the Acolhua culture rather than the Tenochca.

The assertion of Sahagún's informants, claiming that there was no human sacrifice performed during Toxcatl in Tepepulco, had been discussed briefly in Chapter 2. The lack of human sacrifice could have signified that it was reserved only for bigger and more influential political centers like Tenochtitlan, Tlatelolco, Texcoco or Tlaxcala.

The ceremony in Tepepulco bore many references to the agricultural cycle: small offerings made by the participants may have symbolized the end of the period of harvest and gratitude for the abundance of nourishment. The inhabitants expressed their joy through participation in the ceremonial dance and through offerings in the temples of Tezcatlipoca, Huitzilopochtli and Yacatecuhtli, since those three deities were mythologically and ritually involved in their well-being.

Another possible aspect included in the ceremony was the annual completion of temple service celebrated by chosen local boys and girls. Both Sahagún and Durán mentioned such an event taking place in Tlatelolco and Tenochtitlan during the final phase of Toxcatl and there is no reason to believe that provincial cities like Tepepulco had not celebrated it as well. There is strong archeological evidence confirming that Tepepulco possessed a pyramid/plaza complex and a ceremonial avenue, which obviously required numerous staff to maintain and perform ceremonies. It was a fairly common practice among the Aztecs to train their youth in temple convents in order to prepare them for eventual priesthood or train them in austerity, chastity and service duties. It is possible that Tepepulco's temple took care of the education of youth and that the city boasted both types of Aztec schools: the *calmecac* and the *tepochcalli*, where the youth received their training and education.²⁹⁴

It is possible that the feast of abundance and of the end of harvest season also celebrated reaching the social and sexual maturity of its youth. The description in the *Primeros Memoriales* noted that both sexes were

²⁹⁴ Aguilar-Moreno 2006: 98-99; Evans, Webster 2001: 735-736; Nicholson 1974: 145-164.

represented during the Toxcatl Leap and the Winding In and Out dances.²⁹⁵ Initially, the youngsters were accompanied by the masters of youth, who most probably not only supervised the choreography, but also guarded the boys against any transgressions or misbehavior. After completing the dance routine and offering in the temples the youth was probably allowed to leave the convent permanently since they had finished their one-year-long temple duty and were considered ready for marriage and starting their own family.

Erotic factor played an important role in the ceremony and it was further highlighted by Tezcatlipoca's ritual presence. The young people who remained in the temple precinct for a year were expected to obey the rules of absolute abstinence and modesty; any transgression was severely punished and its consequences for the culprit could have been truly dire. Their repressed sexual curiosity was constantly provoked by participation in numerous religious ceremonies where two sexes were expected to perform together, dancing and singing along. The masters of youth were in charge of their proper behavior.

Toxcatl symbolized the end of an era and a possibility of finding a life partner, which must have been a powerful stimulus for abstinent youths. Tezcatlipoca, the patron god of youth and the guardian of *tepochcalli*, was also considered a strongly sexual deity: in the myths he is described as a skilled lover and seducer, although on occasion he acted as a sexual predator and aggressor.²⁹⁶ Ironically, the god considered to be a trickster/seducer was also a patron of the house of youth and promoted

²⁹⁵ See: Chapter 2.

²⁹⁶ Sigal 2011: 127-128.

sexual abstinence. The erotic undercurrent of the Toxcatl celebration resurfaces in this duality: the god promoted chastity, abstinence and moderation, he showed no mercy for those convicted of misdemeanor and yet he promised his pupils the world of carnal pleasures after they compliantly fulfilled their duties.

In conclusion, the feast of Toxcatl in Tepepulco reflected on the characteristics of such ceremony in a provincial Aztec city: it referred to local conditions and to its socio-economic features without being too heavily drawn to the theatre of imperial politics and propaganda. The ritual, which was intended as a celebration of abundance of nourishment and a spectacle of gratitude, included references to one of the most important sectors of regional economy: trade. The presence of the patron deity of merchants Yacatecuhtli honored the profession which helped make Tepepulco prosperous and supported the production of obsidian, the crucial regional resource. The ceremony also included small offerings to Tezcatlipoca, Yacatecuhtli and Huitzilopochtli; Sahagún's informants insisted that the celebration had been held without performing human sacrifice, which could indicate that only the biggest ceremonial centers like Tenochtitlan, Texcoco or Tlatelolco were allowed to perform the ritual killings during the *veintenas*. Finally, the feast symbolized the completion of the temple duty and of the period of abstinence for many young men and girls who served in the temples; the end of Toxcatl indicated their readiness to change status and their social maturity since from that point on they were expected to look for a suitable partner in matrimony and start their own families. Tezcatlipoca's

auspices reminded the community of their changed status and signaled their sexual ripeness.

6.0. Conclusions

The Toxcatl festivities in rural areas and provincial cities of the Aztec Empire were characterized by the absence of human sacrifice; there was no indication in the 16th-century sources that the divine representatives were present during or took part in the rituals. Essentially, the custom of ritual killing of the *ixiptla* appears to have been reserved solely for the major urban centers such as Tenochtitlan, Tlatelolco or Texcoco.

The Toxcatl ceremonies performed outside the metropolis were distinguished by a rather modest and simple scenario, which reflected on the distinct features of a given area, instead of focusing on the politics, the power and the cosmological position of the ruler or the attributes of Tezcatlipoca. The ritual components and activities of the provincial Toxcatl ceremonies indicated the individuality and the idiosyncrasy of a given community through the depiction of one the most notable traits in the local socioeconomic makeup:

- 1) the dominant source of income (e.g.: agriculture, trade),
- 2) the patron deities of certain regions or occupations (Yacatecuhtli, Cihuacoatl, Atlahua).

Principally, the feast of Toxcatl in those areas was a celebration of abundance and the expression of collective gratefulness for the successful harvest. As it was previously mentioned, it did not include human sacrifice

and focused predominantly on other aspects of the feast, which were to some extent present during the ceremony in Tenochtitlan, although marginalized:

- 1) the act of purification through incensing the objects and people with copal smoke,
- 2) food and incense offering to the patron deities, Tezcatlipoca, and Huitzilopochtli.

Another interesting aspect is the change of social status in a specific group of young Aztec boys and girls: the end of Toxcatl marked a rite of passage for a number of temple servants who had successfully completed their service and were therefore fit to look for prospective life partners. The ceremony denoted their sexual and social maturity after a prolonged period of abstinence, penitence and withdrawal from the communal life. The ceremonial dances conveyed their readiness for being re-incorporated by the society and for assuming a new role after a period of liminality – the position of being in-between the childhood and the adulthood, of being separated from the family and the community behind the temple walls. Toxcatl marked the end of training and of staying in social limbo; during the dances young people reclaimed their sexuality and cherished their social maturity.

CHAPTER 5

POWER; PERFORMANCE AND PROPAGANDA – TOXCATL CELEBRATION IN TENOCHTITLAN

1.0. Foreword

The descriptions of the Toxcatl festival in Tenochtitlan are so detailed, complex, and often contradictory, that in order to analyze its true meaning one must focus on each and every aspect of the feast separately. It is necessary to take a closer look at the actors of the ceremony, to investigate various locations in which the rituals were performed, to refer to the religious and mythical background of the deities that were honored and mentioned during Toxcatl in Tenochtitlan, and to the sequence of events which took place during the *veintena*. Each and every element of the ceremony contributes greatly to its modern interpretation and understanding; most of them were unique and appeared only during the festivities which took place on the biggest Aztec city.

Even though the primary sources provide us with scarce evidence of the festival descriptions in other locations, it is possible to deduce that Toxcatl in Tenochtitlan was celebrated with incomparable lavishness, excess, and splendor. This assumption is based on the fact that Tenochtitlan was *de facto* the political and economic center of the Triple Alliance; although it was one of three founding members of the pact, it soon rose to leading position due to its aggressive military campaigns and rapid territorial expansion,

which put the city at the top of a vast, complex tributary system. 16th-century writers agreed on the notion that Texcoco remained the spiritual and cultural center of the Aztec Empire, creating trends in poetry, art, and elegance, whereas Tenochtitlan focused on war craft (Tlacopan is generally believed to be the least significant member of the Triple Alliance, which was accurately reflected in the division of spoils of war and territory).

In the final years of its existence the Triple Alliance was a loose confederation of cities, towns and other political units; Tenochtitlan defined the direction of the territorial and military expansion, putting itself frequently in the prominent position of a leader. Soon this position was too strong to be challenged or threatened by other members of the Triple Alliance. Tenochtitlan exerted its power with merciless consequence and rapidly rose to prominence thanks to its zealous attitude towards war and conquest. This attitude had been further supported by the state and it was reflected and reinforced in religious activities supervised and sponsored by the state itself.

Toxcatl was undoubtedly an example of such strategy: it included references to the patron deity Huitzilopochtli (the god of war and tribal deity of Mexica-Tenochca who, according to their founding myths, brought them from Aztlan to the Lake Texcoco and determined the direction in which they went during their long wandering period), it focused on the relationship between their ruler and the god who designated him and spoke through him – Tezcatlipoca (additionally the god was a reference to the Toltec culture and it helped link the Mexica-Tenochca to it, further strengthening their claim to political

dominance), as well as it addressed the Mexica-Tenochca past and founding myths.

An analysis of themes which were mentioned during Toxcatl should begin with the actors; some of them, such as the *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca or Huitzilopochtli, played a crucial part in the ceremony and therefore the primary sources put them in the center of attention. Other actors, whose part is less obvious or evident, also deserve a closer look: the ruler of Tenochtitlan (*huey tlatoani*) was the key participant in many rituals and reminded the people of his link to the sphere of sacrum, but more importantly, the city of Tenochtitlan itself was a prominent actor – it provided the stage for the spectacle and showcased Mexica-Tenochca wealth and power over its subordinates.

2.0. Tenochtitlan as an actor in the ceremony

2.1. Demonstration of wealth and power

The depictions of the Toxcatl celebration in Tenochtitlan, which can be found in the works of Bernardino de Sahagún, Diego Durán and Juan de Torquemada, portray a spectacular, lavish, and carefully orchestrated display of power and wealth. The main purpose of the festivities must have been obvious to its participants and gathered viewers: the ceremony was supposed to demonstrate the full extent of the Tenochca fortune and opulence. Such extravagant, flaunting exhibition of wealth sent a clear message to all the foreign guests as well as the locals: the city-state of Tenochtitlan was rich beyond imagination; the Triple Alliance was the main

recipient of the tributary system and it possessed great political and economic power.

Prominent guests from the conquered provinces were invited to the celebration to witness its splendor and to report back. Religious spectacles were frequently used by the Tenochca as a means of intimidating prospective opponents and weakening their resolve: faced with such a powerful demonstration of Tenochtitlan's wealth and strength, the leaders of submitted territories were forced to rethink their plans for potential rebellions. The Triple Alliance presented itself in its full glory and reminded them of its military strength and seemingly unlimited resources. Simultaneously the empire reached out to its subjects and offered them a trade relationship within a wide network of the tributary system; the Aztec military expansion caused a rapid increase in exchange of goods throughout Mesoamerica.²⁹⁷

The territorial expansion of the Aztec Empire did not include religious integration, which may have seemed like a paradox in a society so centered on the cult of gods, calendric ceremonies and divinatory rituals. Even though the Aztecs fairly often demanded tribute from submitted provinces in order to raise new temples to their gods, they did not enforce their cults on the conquered populace nor did they force a conversion to their own beliefs; instead, they demonstrated a relatively high tolerance for local religious practices. Their imperial aspirations remained focused on the economic

²⁹⁷ Blanton and Kowalewski 1981: 115.

benefits and the social advancement of commoners and noble warriors alike, which was possible during wartime.²⁹⁸

The representatives of the enemy states which were free from the Aztec supremacy were also encouraged to participate in these ceremonies. The reasons behind such invitations were clear – the Aztecs indirectly threatened the enemy cities with a possibility of military invasion and economic submission since a dominant, powerful political center like Tenochtitlan concentrated on expanding its sphere of influence. The display of wealth and power was calculated to keep the enemies at bay and discourage them from engaging in open conflict with the Triple Alliance, as well as weaken their resistance and convince them to accept Aztec military superiority.

Aztec strategy for dealing with difficult opponents included two distinct tactics: the flowery wars and cutting the enemy off its support base. The first method was used against the opponents who were too powerful and could not be defeated through a single decisive strike. The flowery wars could have been fought to gradually convince the enemy (Tlaxcala, Huexotzinco, Cholula and Atlixco) of the imminence of their defeat and to lead them to voluntary submission. This goal, however, had not been achieved before the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors, who were therefore able to take full advantage of those animosities during their military campaign.

The tactic of encircling the enemy from all sides seemed more successful, but equally time-consuming; during the reign of the Triple Alliance the Aztecs managed to isolate the enemy state of Tlaxcala from its allies and

²⁹⁸ Hassig 1992: 147.

reduced its logistic support.²⁹⁹ The Spanish conquest interrupted this process.

3.0. Tenochtitlan and the *ixiptla* as the *axis mundi*

The following subchapter offers a critical look at the concept stating that Toxcatl positioned Tenochtitlan as the *axis mundi* of the Aztec religious system. The prominent role played by the city of Tenochtitlan during the Toxcatl festival and the extravagant display of its wealth and power could lead to the assumption that the festival was meant to put the powerful city in the center of the world known by the Aztecs and their subjects. The presence of the divine impersonator of Tezcatlipoca could suggest that the god had chosen this city as his seat on earth. Furthermore, the notion of the human being – namely, the *ixiptla*, possibly representing the *axis mundi* will be revised.

The concept of Toxcatl reflecting on the Tenochtitlan as the *axis mundi* had been briefly analyzed and consequently rejected by David Carrasco; the American scholar noted:

(...) the ceremony of Toxcatl reflects neither an *axis mundi* nor a locative vision of place, but rather a vision of place organized by powerful transformations, metamorphoses; a vision of place in which the terrain of the sacred is not concentrated, limited, or restricted to one or several locations. In a manner reminiscent of the paths marked by meandering footprints in the codices, Tezcatlipoca's movements alter our line of vision and mingle places in striking

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

combinations. This metamorphic vision of place is best represented in the transformations that Tezcatlipoca's *ixiptla* underwent.³⁰⁰

It is highly unlikely that Tenochtitlan played the part of the axis mundi during Toxcatl due to the fact that the festival had been celebrated on many different locations in the Valley of Mexico. The ritual activities had not been limited to Tenochtitlan; the calendar festival was widely known and celebrated in various cities.³⁰¹ Moreover, the festivities in Tenochtitlan crossed the city limits on numerous occasions: the divine representative travelled together with his entourage to numerous sites outside the city, as observed by Bernardino de Sahagún in the *Florentine Codex*.

The same argument is valid for the concept of the *ixiptla* embodying the *axis mundi*. If that assumption was true, the *ixiptla* would represent the meeting point between the spheres of the sacred and the profane. His mortal body could have served as a vessel for the divine force but the carrier was believed to contain only a portion of the divine essence – he was merely an agent of the divine, and not the god himself. He represented Tezcatlipoca and carried a portion of his divinity, which would be eventually returned to the god after the sacrifice was performed.

The *ixiptla* could have been the symbolical intermediary between the god and his followers on the mortal plane. Bernardino de Sahagún had mentioned that the representative visited numerous noble houses and met with the ruler himself on a few occasions during his year as the avatar of

³⁰⁰ Carrasco 1999: 124.

³⁰¹ See: Chapter 4.

Tezcatlipoca-Titlacauan; the young man entertained the elite with song and dance.³⁰²

There is no direct evidence in the 16th-century written sources that the living image of Tezcatlipoca served as a spokesman for the god or that he performed more politically responsible social functions - even during the period of time towards the end of Toxcatl, when the ruler deliberately withdrew from the public life, hid in his palace and symbolically vested the *ixiptla* with his power for the period of five days. Bernardino de Sahagún mentioned various activities undertaken by the representative and his entourage during those final days in the Book II of the *Florentine Codex*; none of them indicated that the young man took any political or legislative actions while “substituting” for the *tlatoani*.³⁰³ He appeared to be completely excluded from the decision-making process and held neither real power nor influence. The *tlatoani* seemed to be the only true spokesman of Tezcatlipoca (except for the main priests of Tezcatlipoca who could express his demand of human sacrifice, and who determined the beginning and the end of a fight on the battlefield during a flowery war). The *ixiptla* remained a representative in name and form only – he held no real power over the people and merely signaled Tezcatlipoca’s omnipresence, reminding the people of it with the sound of his flute and with his nightly appearances on the streets of Tenochtitlan.

Another argument against the theory of *ixiptla* as *axis mundi* stems from the fact that there were several divine impersonators living and performing

³⁰² Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 9.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

simultaneously in the main Aztec cities; it contradicts directly the main principle of the *axis mundi* being a center of the hierophany and the cult, since logically there can only be one center at the time. Furthermore, the *ixiptla* from Tenochtitlan changed places so frequently during his final days that he could not have been assigned to one particular ceremonial location. Instead, his pilgrimages and travels constituted an entire ritual landscape of sites which probably played a significant part in the cult of Tezcatlipoca and referred to its history and possible origins: Tecanman, Tepetzinco, Tepepulco, Acaquilpan, and finally, Tlacoachcalco.³⁰⁴

Having taken all these points into consideration, it is possible to state with all certainty that neither the city of Tenochtitlan nor the *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca represented the *axis mundi* during the festival of Toxcatl. Tenochtitlan was one of many locations where Toxcatl was celebrated, whereas the *ixiptla* from Tenochtitlan was most surely not the only divine representative of Tezcatlipoca destined to be sacrificed during Toxcatl at that time in the Valley of Mexico. Moreover, the *ixiptla* was not even considered a fully-fledged speaker for the god, since this part was reserved exclusively for the ruler; the representative held a portion of the divine essence for the duration of his year-long performance and returned it to Tezcatlipoca after his death on the sacrificial altar. The *tlatoani*, however, had been appointed by Tezcatlipoca for a longer period of time and enjoyed his prerogatives as a

³⁰⁴ Even though the Toxcatl ceremony in Tepepulco described by Sahagún in the *Primeros Memoriales* did not include human sacrifice of the *ixiptla*, the divine representative from Tenochtitlan visited this city with his entourage during the five final days of his life, and supposedly sang and danced there, together with his wives. See: Sahagún 1974: 31-32; Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 68).

true “speaker”. It is time to take a closer look at the relations and connections between the two appointed embodiments of the god.

4.0. The living image and the speaker – representatives of Tezcatlipoca in Toxcatl

4.1. Tezcatlipoca – *tlatoani* – *ixiptla*

An Aztec emperor –*huey tlatoani* – was selected by the high council (*tetecuhtin*) after the death of the previous ruler. The council consisted of lords who were male relatives of the dead emperor. When an emperor died, his brother or son usually succeeded to the office, although sometimes a nephew or a grandson was elected. To become a *huey tlatoani*, one had to be a member of the supreme military council called the *tlacateccatl*, which consisted of four men, usually brothers or other relatives of the ruler. Therefore, two conditions were presented: the candidate had to be a member of the ruling family (although the succession did not necessarily pass from father to son – brothers of the ruler were usually preferred, since they already possessed the necessary experience) and the candidate had to distinguish himself as a courageous war veteran.³⁰⁵

Book VI of the *Florentine Codex*, called *Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy*, includes numerous speeches and prayers held during the inauguration of a new ruler of Tenochtitlan.³⁰⁶ It quotes the nobles and the high priests who addressed the newly appointed *tlatoani* during the ceremony, instructing him

³⁰⁵ Aguilar-Moreno 2006: 76.

³⁰⁶ Most probably it refers to Moctezuma II Xocoyotzin who was the *huey tlatoani* of the Aztec Empire from 1502 to 1520; during his reign the empire expanded rapidly and reached its maximum size. Moctezuma II was killed in the early phase of the Spanish conquest of Mexico.

on his duties; it also includes the speech that the ruler held after these instructions.³⁰⁷ His courtly and elaborate address was directed to Tezcatlipoca; during the speech the *tlatoani* humbly accepted his changed social status and the new responsibilities that awaited him. Certain parts of that monologue precisely described the nature of the relationship between the *tlatoani* and his god:

Who am I? Who do I think I am that thou movest me among, thou bringest me among, thou countest me with thy acquaintances, thy friends, thy chosen ones, those who have desert, those who have merit? Just so were they by nature; so were they born to rule; thou hast opened their eyes, thou hast opened their ears. And thou hast taken possession of them, thou hast inspired them. Just so were they created, so were they sent here. They were born at a time, they were bathed at a time, their day signs were such that they would become lords, would become rulers. It is said that they will become thy backrests, thy flutes. Thou wilt have them replace thee, thou wilt have them substitute for thee, thou wilt hide thyself in them; from within them thou wilt speak; they will pronounce for thee (...).³⁰⁸

The term “*thy chosen ones*” referred to the previous rulers of Tenochtitlan; the quotation revealed an important concept behind the principle of sovereignty in the Aztec Empire - all of the predecessors of the newly elected *tlatoani* were selected by Tezcatlipoca and predestined to sit on the reed mat, which was the Aztec equivalent of a throne. The god allegedly chose them before they were born and guided them through their life, inspired them, and *possessed* them, which would indicate that the *tlatoani* was a vessel for Tezcatlipoca, and his mortal “carrier”. He served as the god’s “backrest” and

³⁰⁷ Book VI of the *Florentine Codex* consists of the so-called *huehuetlatolli*, rhetorical orations handed down from generation to generation. Most of them had been compiled in 1547 in Tlatelolco, years before Sahagún went to Tepepulco to gather the material for the *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España*. The informants who provided him with the information for Book VI were former high ranking functionaries of that area: judges, priests and royal counselors. See: Sullivan 1980).

³⁰⁸ Sahagún 1950-1982: VI: 41.

his “flute”: he was a consecrated, anointed speaker of the god and his direct representative on earth. His relationship with Tezcatlipoca was significantly closer and more intimate than the one between the god and his main priests, since there is no reference to the latter being called “backrests” or “flutes”.

The exact nature of the “flute” can be explained on the example of the ritual activities of the *ixiptla*: during his year-long residence in Tenochtitlan, the young man frequently visited the city at night, playing the flute on the streets and on the top of the temple pyramid. The sounds of the flute were supposed to remind the inhabitants of the Tezcatlipoca’s presence in the city; the same could be said about the *tlatoani* as Tezcatlipoca’s “flute”. The ruler served as the constant reminder of the divine presence in the city: the god could “hide in him” and he could let the ruler “substitute for him”, speaking for him to his people.

In the following part of the address the new *tlatoani* asked Tezcatlipoca for guidance and counsel; the nature of the ruler’s office was further explained:

O master, O our lord, O night, O wind, do not depart completely. Come passing by here; know the humble reed enclosure, the mound of earth, for I await thee at thy humble home, at thy humble waiting place. I do what I can for thee, I place my trust in thee. I request, I seek, I expect, I ask of thee thy spirit, thy word, with which thou hast possessed, with which thou hast inspired thy friends, thy acquaintances, who ordered things for thee on thy reed mat, on thy reed seat, thy place of honor. It is where thou art given a proxy, where thou art replaced by another, where thou art substituted, where there is pronouncing for thee, where there is speaking for thee, where thou usest one as a flute, where thou speakest from within one, where thou makest one thy eyes, thy ears; where thou makest one thy mouth, thy jaw. (...) Thou wilt determine the way on thy reed mat, on thy reed seat, thy place of honor. And howsoever thou wilt require of me, that I shall do, that I shall perform. Whichsoever road

thou wilt show me, that one I shall follow; whatsoever thou wilt reveal unto me, that I shall say, that shall I pronounce.³⁰⁹

The *tlatoani* revealed that he himself was merely a tool in Tezcatlipoca's hands and that he submitted himself entirely to the god, entrusting him with his life and leaving all the decisions to him. The repeated declaration of submission put special emphasis on the passive part that the ruler played in the relationship. However, this rhetorical figure gave immense power to the *tlatoani*: since he presented himself as merely a vessel for divine force and will, all the orders and decisions he made must have come directly from Tezcatlipoca:

(...) verily I am thy backrest, I am thy flute; not by my desert, not by my merit. I am thy lips, I am thy jaw, I am thy eyes, I am thy ears. And me, a commoner, a laborer, thou hast made thy teeth, thy fingernails. Insert, place within me a little of thy spirit, of thy word; it is that which is ever heeded and is irrefutable.³¹⁰

On his inauguration day the ruler was given advice on his duties and attitude by an established and important nobleman (probably a council member):

Submit thyself to him [Tezcatlipoca]; weep, sigh. And may there be peace, calm, on the reed mat, on the reed seat, on the place of honor of the lord of the near, of the nigh. Receive, speak to those who come in anguish, and those who come meeting their fate. Be not a fool. (...) Take yet, grasp yet, arrive yet at the truth, for, it is said and it is true, thou art the replacement, thou art the image of the lord of the near, of the nigh. Thou art the backrest, thou art the flute; he speaketh within thee; he maketh thee his lips, he maketh thee his jaw; he maketh thee his ears. (...) And again take thou note: also cause not embarrassment, for

³⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 43-44.

³¹⁰ Ibid., p. 45.

our lord hath made thee his teeth, hath made thee his fingernails; for thou art like the destroyer, thou art the destroyer, thou art the judge.³¹¹

The holy office of the *huey tlatoani* could not be subjected to ridicule; it was the position of the highest honor and importance. The ruler had to maintain his dignity and grace at all times for he was the representative of Tezcatlipoca on earth: he judged mortals and waged war in god's name.

The office of the *tlatoani* was a sacred one. The ruler was inspired and possessed by Tezcatlipoca, speaking for him and expressing his will with his own mouth. He was not born sacred; he underwent a consecration and a transformation into a divine vessel during his inauguration as the ruler. The nobleman who addressed him on that occasion offered more details on that metamorphosis:

Although the common folk have gladdened thee, and although thy younger brother, thy older brother have put their trust in thee, now thou art deified. Although thou art human, as are we, although thou art our friend, although thou art our son, our younger brother, our older brother, no more art thou human, as we are; we do not look to thee as human. Already thou representest, thou replaces one. Thou callest out to, thou speakest in a strange tongue to the god, the lord of the near, of the nigh. And within thee he calleth out to thee; he is within thee; he speaketh forth from thy mouth. (...) He hath given thee gifts, he hath given thee honor, he hath provided thee thy fangs, thy claws.³¹²

During the inauguration the new *tlatoani* was transformed from a mortal man to the divine representative who spoke "*a strange tongue to the god*" and who hosted Tezcatlipoca within his body. The narrator left no doubt that the office of the *huey tlatoani* was considered sacred. The person holding it, on

³¹¹ Ibid., p. 50.

³¹² Ibid., p. 52-53.

the other hand, was not. Although the future ruler was chosen by Tezcatlipoca before his birth, he was born an ordinary man. His success as a warrior and skilled tactician, combined with his noble birth, could secure him a place in the military council, which would eventually lead to his selection. He became possessed by Tezcatlipoca on his inauguration day, and only then could he claim real political power. The warnings issued by the nobles during the ceremony reflected on the true nature of his office: Tezcatlipoca chose him to serve and he could easily strip him of this honor if he found him unworthy.

According to the Aztec moral philosophy described in the *Florentine Codex*, the god could express his dissatisfaction and disappointment with his representative by sending him an untimely death (for example, in an accident or from a sudden sickness) and replacing him with a new candidate. The office of the *huey tlatoani* granted a noble man divinity, which could be easily revoked by the god himself.³¹³

Tenochtitlan hosted two emissaries of Tezcatlipoca: the ruler and the *ixiptla*. The former had been elected by the high council of nobles, the latter had been chosen from other young war captives by a priest or a master of youth. Both of them were expected to possess certain qualities in order to qualify for their position. The *tlatoani* had to be a member of the royal house and the military council *tlacatecatl*; an outsider would never be taken into consideration, since the Aztec nobility of Tenochtitlan claimed to have been

³¹³ Such was the fate of Moctezuma II Xocoyotzin, who died in mysterious circumstances during the initial phase of the Spanish conquest of Mexico. According to various sources, he was either killed by the Spaniards, or died from the wounds inflicted upon him by his own subjects.

direct descendants of the god Quetzalcoatl.³¹⁴ The suitable candidate had to be a close male relative of the previous ruler, preferably a brother or a son. In addition to his noble lineage, he had to achieve a high military position and enter the *tlacatecatl* before becoming a ruler: the office was passed exclusively to warriors who were regarded seasoned and courageous, and therefore properly equipped with skills and tactical talent to lead successful war campaigns in the future.

First-hand battlefield experience was considered necessary for an Aztec noble male, who was pressured from an early age by the family and teachers to prove his capability and bravery during training, and to establish himself as an accomplished fighter. Most probably the sons of the royal house were put under enormous stress and were forced to meet the high expectations of the society considering the fact that all of them, given they reached adult age, were prospective rulers. An impeccable military career combined with tactical skills guaranteed the heir's proficiency as a future leader.

Both the ruler and the *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca had battle experience, although they shared it from rather different perspectives: the *tlatoani* had previously demonstrated his mastery in tactics and hand-to-hand combat, while on the contrary the *ixiptla* was a war captive and a former prisoner. Taking into account the physical requirements which the captive had to meet in order to become a divine representative, it is safe to assume that he had been

³¹⁴ In addition to the alleged divine ancestry, all noble houses of Tenochtitlan were descendants of Acamapichtli, the first *tlatoani* of the Aztecs who reigned from 1376 to 1395. Acamapichtli was the product of a union between a Mexica leader and a princess from the ruling house of Culhuacan, a neo-Toltec city. The first *tlatoani* took wives from each *calpulli* (a district - the basic organizational unit) of Tenochtitlan to better integrate with the community. His progeny constituted the Aztec nobility of Tenochtitlan.

relatively inexperienced; a mature warrior would boast his share of battle scars, the reminders of past skirmishes, whereas the perfect impersonator of Tezcatlipoca was a young male of unblemished beauty.

Presumably young warriors who served as the living images of the god were caught during their first war campaign or a flowery war and therefore had not received any scars. It had been previously mentioned that warriors from the enemy city-states of Huexotzinco, Tlaxcala, Cholula and Atlixco were highly valued among the Aztecs for their bravery and ferocity on the battlefield and were considered worthy opponents. Captives for such a prestigious task as impersonating a popular Mesoamerican deity were certainly selected from a group which deserved respect from the Aztec point of view. For that reason fierce warriors from the enemy provinces were ideal candidates: firstly, they spoke Nahuatl, the *lingua franca* of the Aztec Empire; secondly, they shared the same social values and expectations towards their men (such as: courage, honor, pride and dignity). What was also important, they were familiar with the ceremonial calendar and believed in the similar pantheon of gods (the biggest difference was the choice of the patron deity). Finally, they understood and shared the concept of human sacrifice - a prestigious, honorable death on the sacrificial stone. A young enemy warrior fully accepted the possibility of such end if caught in the midst of battle. Demonstrating fear in public and avoiding responsibility in captivity would cover his family and the *calpulli* in shame.³¹⁵

³¹⁵ Sullivan (1980) wrote: "The rewards for the valiant and dedicated warrior came in the form of riches and elevation in rank and honor, until one day he would become one of the ruler's most trusted aides, or on his death, take the place of the ruler himself. Cowards were executed. If for some reason the ruler wished to spare him the ignominy, such as in the case

The only righteous option meant participating in the spectacle and carrying on with his duties. Tlacaelel - the chief advisor to four consecutive Tenochtitlan rulers (Itzcoatl, Moctezuma I, Axayacatl and Tizoc), was believed to have introduced the concept of a flowery war and, consequently, indicated which enemy cities should constitute a suitable “market” for war captives and sacrificial victims:

This market, say I, Tlacaelel, let it be situated in Tlaxcala, Huexotzinco, Cholula, Atlixco, Tliliuhquitepec, and Tecoac. For if we situate it farther away, in such places as Yopotzinco or Michoacan or in the region of the Huastecs, all of which are already under our domination, their remoteness would be more than our armies could endure. They are too far, and, besides, the flesh of those barbaric people is not to the liking of our god. They are like old and stale tortillas, because, as I say, they speak strange languages and they are barbarians. For this reason it is more convenient that our fair and markets be in the six cities that I have mentioned...Our god will feed himself with them as though he were eating warm tortillas, soft and tasty, straight out the oven.³¹⁶

Although in this particular speech Tlacaelel referred to the god Huitzilopochtli, his principle of victims selection became universal for all ceremonies in Tenochtitlan; the slaves who spoke “barbaric” (non-Nahuatl) languages were regarded as less valuable, whereas the “civilized” captives were suitable for special occasions and considered an appropriate nourishment for the deities associated with the official state cult.³¹⁷

of a near relative, he was taken to the battlefield and allowed to be killed or captured”. In reality, the possibility of becoming the next ruler was strictly reserved for the nearest male relatives of the previous *tlatoani*.

³¹⁶ León-Portilla 1963: 163.

³¹⁷ The deities whose temples were included in the sacred precinct of Tenochtitlan (*ithualli*) were considered crucial to the state due to their history and an original tribal patronage, or their affiliation with the royal house and noble families. Their cult supported the Mexica claim to supremacy. The gods whose temples were located outside the sacred precinct were usually brought to Tenochtitlan by foreign groups of settlers; their festivals were often

Guilhem Olivier noted that, according to Sahagún's informants, the representative of Tezcatlipoca was one of two described as prisoners of war among the sacrificial victims whose social status was specified. The second exception was the war captive sacrificed as the *ixiptla* of the fire god Xiuhtecuhtli during the Izcalli festival. Whenever an *ixiptla* was mentioned (e.g.: the images of the gods Tlamatzincatl, Izquitecatl, Mixcoatl, Yeuatlicue, Coatlicue, Ilamatecuhtli, Xiuhtecuhtli, and Ixcozauhqui), he or she was always described as a purified slave, "the bathed one".³¹⁸

Olivier made an interesting suggestion on the origin and fate of the sacrificial victim: relative to the cities and years the social origin of the living image of Tezcatlipoca changed because a noble Nahuatl-speaking captive was not always "available".³¹⁹ Due to various reasons the warriors might have not provided the city with suitable candidates for the Toxcatl sacrifice, whether for the lack of captives or their physical imperfections. As evidence Olivier quoted Motolinía who mentioned that the Mexica sometimes offered a slave if

included in the *xiuhpohualli* and enjoyed great popularity, although without the political prestige reserved for the *ithualli*. The sacred precinct hosted the temples of: Huitzilopochtli, Tezcatlipoca, Quetzalcoatl, Xipe, Cihuacoatl, Tlaloc, Chicomecoatl, Xochiquetzal, and Mixcoatl. See: Brundage 1985: 71-73.

³¹⁸ Olivier 2002: 114; Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 137-138, 155, 162.

Sacrificial victims were divided into two groups: 1) the prisoners of war who had been captured in battle and delivered by their captors to the gods as an offering; such captives were highly valued and therefore they were considered appropriate for sacrifice during specific ceremonies (e.g.: Toxcatl) or for special state need; 2) "the bathed ones" (*tlaahtilli*), slaves purchased on a market and provided by merchants or rich artisans. Since the state of slavery was regarded as shameful, the selected slaves were subjected to a series of ceremonial baths in order to obtain the desired level of "purity". During the period of ritual cleansing the slaves were publicly displayed and presented their ability to dance and walk elegantly, which added to the owner's prestige. The merchants usually offered the slaves to the gods and accompanied them to the pyramid temple, and later claimed the body after the sacrifice was done. Certain parts of the body were brought to the merchant's residence and were prepared for the private banquet. Furthermore, there was a crucial distinction made between the prisoner of war and the bought slave: even though both died a "honorable death", the sacrificed warriors went to join the sun god, while the common slaves descended to the underworld called Mictlan. See: Brundage 1985: 165-167; Durán 1967: 64, 181; Torquemada 1969: II: 82).

³¹⁹ Olivier 2002: 107.

they did not have a prisoner of war.³²⁰ Additionally, the sacrifice of the representative might have been delayed by the ruler if the *ixiptla* fulfilled his duties especially well and a slave had been offered in his stead, as reported by Durán and Alvarado Tezozomoc.³²¹ However, the representative would have to be eventually sacrificed.³²²

4.2. Death of the *ixiptla* – its symbolism and significance

Two representatives of Tezcatlipoca lived simultaneously in Tenochtitlan and their paths crossed on several occasions; during one of these encounters the ruler adorned the *ixiptla*. The divine representative was arrayed with eagle down and popcorn flowers, golden shell pendants, turquoise mosaic earplugs, a seashell necklace and white seashell breast ornament; a snail shell lip pendant was inserted in his lip; his arms were covered with golden and turquoise bracelets; a net cape was hung about his breechcloth; his legs were decorated with gold bells; he was given obsidian sandals with ocelot skin ears.³²³

The act of adornment could have been a symbol of subjugation: the ruler had publicly acknowledged Tezcatlipoca's sovereignty by offering him his ornaments. It could also serve as a reaffirmation of the bond between the god and the ruler designated by him. Sahagún mentioned that the *tlatoani* went into seclusion during the last five days of Toxcatl.³²⁴ The *ixiptla* was symbolically substituting for him without making any significant political

³²⁰ Motolinía 1971: 52.

³²¹ Durán 1967: 493-497. Alvarado Tezozomoc 1980: 670-681.

³²² Olivier 2002: 108.

³²³ Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 66.

³²⁴ Ibid., p. 68.

decisions. A question must be asked: why were two simultaneous incarnations of Tezcatlipoca necessary?

The *tlatoani* and the *ixiptla* may have represented Tezcatlipoca for two separate and entirely different purposes; certain ritual functions could not have been carried out by the ruler on account of his political duties and the nature of his office. It would imply that the two actors divided specific ritual responsibilities between themselves and they expressed various aspect of the same multi-faceted deity. The most evident example of such a division of duties was reflected by the sacrificial death of the *ixiptla*.

Guilhem Olivier suggested that the *ixiptla* virtually replaced the ruler on the sacrificial stone; the act of “swapping” places played by these actors was initiated by the act of royal seclusion.³²⁵ The *ixiptla* would remain the only manifestation of the god “visible” to the public eye and continue his performance until death, which could represent the symbolic death of the hidden *tlatoani*. Since the ruler himself could not die on annual basis, he could have been replaced by the “interchangeable” representative. Olivier claimed that the *tlatoani* was the sacrificer at the ceremony and therefore virtually offered his own life.³²⁶ A similar statement had been made by Michel Graulich:

In Mexican rites, the sacrificer who ‘kills’ [i.e., offers for sacrifice] a human victim thus succeeds in ‘looking the great god Huitzilopochtli in the eyes’ (...). This is one of the factors

³²⁵ Olivier 2002: 115-120; Olivier 2008.

³²⁶ Ibid., p. 116.

that lead me to believe that the victim is a substitute for the sacrificer, that the former dies in the latter's place, and that the latter offers his life vicariously.³²⁷

Olivier followed with a hypothesis claiming that by breaking the flutes on the stairs of the temple the representative of Tezcatlipoca expressed the temporary break of relations between the people and the gods, which coincided with the death of the *tlatoani*. With the appearance of the new representative of the god, the king was reborn, and the sound of the flutes also demonstrated the restoration of contact with Tezcatlipoca.

Did the Aztec sovereign symbolically die during Toxcatl? There is no reference to the death of Tezcatlipoca in the Aztec mythology; no Aztec myth mentioned or required ritual regicide. Such rites had been observed in a few ancient, nowadays extinct cultures (e.g.: in Timor, Namibia, Celtic Ireland, etc.). Even though Toxcatl emerged originally in the Mesoamerican calendar as an agrarian rite celebrating the cycle of death and rebirth, there is no mention of the ceremonial regicide in the written sources. The theory of the *tlatoani's* symbolic death is therefore unsubstantiated. However, the other representative of Tezcatlipoca died each year in the end of the Toxcatl festival. Why was this sacrifice necessary if it was not a myth reenactment? Why did the living image of Tezcatlipoca die if Tezcatlipoca never died in the myths?

The cultures which accepted the Mesoamerican calendar had to follow the schedule of festivals and sacrifices. In this context the ritual death of the Tezcatlipoca's representative during Toxcatl varies from other Aztec

³²⁷ Graulich 1987: 105, translated and quoted by Olivier in: Olivier 2002: 116.

“calendric” sacrifices in one specific way: the victim was expected to participate in the performance for the duration of the entire calendar year instead of being selected and subsequently sacrificed. The transformations of the *ixiptla* and his travels to various ceremonial destinations combined with his presence in the city “saturated space with Tezcatlipoca’s music, mirror, and living image before returning to a ceremonial center to undergo his final transformation”.³²⁸

Sahagún’s informants summed up the act of sacrifice during Toxcatl in the following manner:

And this betokeneth our life on earth. For he who rejoiceth, who possesseth riches, who seeketh and coveteth our lord’s sweetness, his gentleness – riches and prosperity – thus endeth in great misery. For it is said: ‘None come to an end here upon earth with happiness, riches, and wealth.’³²⁹

The life and death of the living image of Tezcatlipoca served as a parable, teaching a moral about life:

We are told that it is acceptable and even desirable to live in riches, esteeming Tezcatlipoca and his sweetness, his fragrance, his wealth. But it is also the cosmic law that a person, especially the warrior who becomes Tezcatlipoca, must undergo an elaborate initiatory elevation and humiliation, must die a perfect death, and be displayed on the skull rack. In fact, it appears that Tezcatlipoca becomes the model for all humans as “no one on earth went exhausting happiness, riches, wealth.”³³⁰

The death of the living image of Tezcatlipoca represented another key concept in the Aztec philosophy, accurately described by Thelma Sullivan:

³²⁸ Carrasco 1999: 129.

³²⁹ Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 68.

³³⁰ Carrasco 1999: 136-137.

Like the ruler to whom sacrifices were made to give him the strength to carry on in the arduous work of governing, so all the gods, not just the Sun, had to be nourished in order to continue to do their work. The Aztec economy, like that of the Teotihuacanos, the Toltecs, and their descendants, was agriculturally based and the growth-death-renewal cycle characteristic of nature predominated in the lives of the people. This is clearly manifested in the eighteen festivals of twenty days each that followed the solar year. The death of a victim representing the god of fire, or the god of rain, or the goddess of new corn, for example, was the means by which the life force of the individual was transferred to the deity so that his energies could be renewed and he could continue to function. The energies of the gods were as finite as man's; like man, the gods became weary.

(...) The reason, then, that the sacrificial victim was arrayed in the vestments of the god to whom he was to be sacrificed, and was considered his image and likeness – *ixiptlatl* which also means “substitute” – was because he was destined to become one with the deity. The life that went out of him upon his death was immediately incorporated into that of the deity; in short, he was sacrificed so that the god might live. Since the gods personified aspects of the natural phenomena, and the elements and heavenly bodies which controlled them, human sacrifice guaranteed their perpetuation and with it the cyclical renewal of plant and animal growth that sustained life on earth. (...) The model for this was the creation of the Fifth Sun in which the vital forces of all the gods that were released when they sacrificed themselves, combined to put the Sun in motion so that it could do its work.³³¹

Given that the living image of Tezcatlipoca was believed to hold a piece of the divine essence, which transformed him from a war captive into the embodiment of the god, the act of sacrifice not only replenished Tezcatlipoca's vital energy and nourished him, but it also returned the essence to its original owner after a period of “lease”. The human carrier of the divine energy had to die every year, so that the deity itself could remain whole. The mortal victim completed the cycle of birth, death and renewal in

³³¹ Sullivan 1980: 235-236.

the name of the god, who stayed intact. The act of the energy transfer, expressed in the sacrificial rituals, became a perfect illustration for the Aztec cosmology, theology and their complex worldview. The *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca had to die during each Toxcatl festival, because through this elaborate performance the concept of universal harmony could be presented, the cosmic arrangement was reaffirmed and sealed, and the world was kept safe in the midst of the perpetual conflict of chaos and order. Ritual violence in the Aztec philosophy was a means to maintain the universe in its present shape: the gods had been properly nourished and strengthened; the Sun and the Moon kept moving through the sky and the world of men was granted another year.

An interesting feature, which distinguished the death of the *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca-Titlacauan from other *ixiptla* sacrifices, was its location and private character. Most of the sacrifices were performed in front of a gathered audience, making them a public spectacle; the victim was visible from the distance and its body was disposed of by being thrown down the steps of a temple pyramid. Both nobles and commoners were allowed to observe the rituals. The sacrifice of the *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca-Titlacauan stands in vivid contrast to this custom: the representative had been previously separated from his women and companions and was followed only by his guards to the temple of Tlacoachcalco, which was located in considerable distance from Tenochtitlan. His death was most probably watched by few people: the priests who performed the sacrifice and the guards who made sure he would not change his mind and flee in the last minute. This act differed greatly

from his very public life during the previous year; he was stripped of his splendor and prestige, forced to face his destiny in isolation and seclusion.

The reasons behind such intimate scenery of the final spectacle of Toxcatl were never directly explained, although Sahagún implied that such quiet and unspectacular end reflected on the misery of the human condition and the capriciousness of fate.³³² Another possible explanation for this choice of surroundings could be the fact that Tezcatlipoca was usually shrouded in mystery; perhaps the death of his own living image was considered too sacred to be displayed for public viewing and required a remote, isolated location. The divine essence of Tezcatlipoca had been replenished once again and the choice of the next *ixiptla* had been made away from the eyes of the commoners.

The choice of such a secluded location could also have been connected to the symbolic breach of contact between the spheres of the sacred and the profane represented by the breaking of flutes on the steps of the temple pyramid of Tlacoachcalco. In the eyes of the Aztecs the breach could have posed a great risk to the cosmic order and therefore it required a special *mise-en-scène*, away from the crowded plazas of big cities; the same could be said about the New Fire ceremony (*xiuhmolpilli*) which took place every 52 years in the remote location on the top of the Huixachtecatl mountain.

4.3. *Ixiptla* as a paragon

According to David Carrasco:

³³² Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 68.

(...) the emphasis on the beholder's experience and the link between image and consciousness relates to what I call the experience of 'ortho-visus', that is, seeing divine images in dramatic appearances according to an authoritative norm. The ceremony of Toxcatl suggests that ortho-visus, in this case seeing how Tezcatlipoca's images and powers saturate the world, is a potent trigger in the experience of synesthesia. The role of seeing the divine through images in the world is crucial to truly knowing the divine. (...) It is crucial to emphasize that in the cosmo-magical world of the Aztecs, these images often move and are alive with divine force, participate in the ritual as much as humans do, and also (in various ways) see, hear, speak, taste, and touch the social world.³³³

Carrasco perceived the year-long performance of the *ixiptla* as a stage for pivotal transformations:

(...) the image of Tezcatlipoca was alive, not only in the sense that a human being was the public image, but also in the changes he underwent at different stages of the year-long ceremony. The ideal person who started the ceremony was changed into the cultural paragon of Aztec society. Although it is nowhere stated as such, the impersonator was akin to a human 'flower and song', an excellent aesthetic form on the earth, manifesting divine powers in a human body, costume, and arts. After parading before the populace, he was changed into the ruler's god, the lord of the palace, and then again paraded before the eyes of the people who were humbled in his presence. Then, in a remarkable reversal, he is stripped of his divine adornments, both the ones bestowed by Moctezuma and the human ornaments in the form of women who were *ixiptlatin* of goddesses. Another transformation is signaled when he breaks his whistles and flutes on the steps, for he has returned to the image of the warrior, akin to the battlefield status he held before his capture.³³⁴

In the quoted passage Carrasco suggested that the living image of Tezcatlipoca – Titlacauan served as a cultural paragon of the Aztec society: during the first phase of his performance the young captive represented the

³³³ Carrasco 1999: 129-130.

³³⁴ Ibid., p. 134.

ideal of physical perfection and manifested his prowess in dancing, singing, and courtly conduct. Subsequently he was transformed into the “ruler’s god”, who defined the relationship between Tezcatlipoca and the *tlatoani*. In the end, he “fell from grace” during a dramatic sacrificial spectacle.

Several questions emerge in relation to this theory. First of all: what kind of a paragon would the *ixiptla* of Titlacauan represent? How did his performance relate to Aztec gender roles? What was the Aztec concept of masculinity and how did the *ixiptla* address that? How did the transformations of *ixiptla* relate to the reality of Aztec daily life? Finally, what was the purpose of this year-long “presentation” and whom did it concern?

4.3.1. Titlacauan versus the Aztec concept of masculinity

Carrasco implied that *ixiptla* of Titlacauan reflected on the Aztec ideal of beauty and cultural refinement;³³⁵ the description of the physical qualities required from a captive in order to become the image of god takes up two pages in the second volume of the *Florentine Codex*.³³⁶ Nevertheless, the picture of the perfect young male that Sahagún painted contradicts the concept of Aztec masculinity itself – the *ixiptla* of Titlacauan was not compatible with the qualities that the Aztecs found desirable in an adult male. Some researchers went further, claiming that the *ixiptla* described by Sahagún seemed simply effeminate and contradicted “valued muscular strength and toughness”.³³⁷ Based on both the contemporary European and the pre-conquest Aztec standards the *ixiptla* of Titlacauan did not possess

³³⁵ Ibid., p. 134.

³³⁶ Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 64-65.

³³⁷ Klein 2001: 223.

the qualities that would render him “masculine” – notable physical strength expressed by muscle mass and broad shoulders. On the contrary, his entire physique was lean, unblemished by battle scars, and combined with his long hair falling loose on his shoulders, quite androgynous.

The concept of male perfection in the Aztec society was interconnected with war and warrior life; its roots can be found in the Aztec mythology, which also explained the nature and origin of gender roles. Although men and women were partners created simultaneously by Quetzalcoatl (unlike the Judeo-Christian Adam and Eve), the god had to use blood from his penis to mold them; he established a pattern, in which men were responsible for the provision of blood for the religious rituals. According to the Aztec worldview, this primal act of fertilization justified and encouraged waging war as a means of providing victims for sacrifice; the extraction of blood granted eternal life to the gods.

These gender patterns were further reinforced by Aztec educational system and cycles of rituals.³³⁸ Harsh conditions in *calmecac* and *telpochcalli* schools took young boys out of their safe home environment and disciplined them through penance, hard physical labor, sleep deprivation, cold, and periods of fasting. Learning discipline was considered the first step of becoming a warrior.³³⁹ It was also a necessary preparation for future long-distance campaigns, which grew more frequent as the young empire expanded; during these journeys men depended on limited dried food rations and often slept on the ground, covered with their own cloak. These

³³⁸ Pennock 2008: 29.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

hardships probably troubled them little since they were used to low temperatures, ritual fasting and vigil thanks to their stay in the “House of Youth”.³⁴⁰

Adult men were expected to demonstrate courage, competitive streak and disregard for death; bravery was the virtue that was highly praised and demanded from Aztec males. The most experienced and decorated warriors took special vows, some never to turn their backs in battle, and others, more radically, never to take a backward step.³⁴¹ The same, if not more, was expected of the supreme military leader, the *tlatoani* of Tenochtitlan. After the emergence of the Triple Alliance the prospective ruler was elected from the members of the Council of Four, which included two highest military commanders: the ruler himself usually held one of those two positions. After the election, followed by a period of seclusion and fasting, the first public duty of the new *tlatoani* was to lead his men to his first military campaign.³⁴² A passage in the *Florentine Codex* describing his election mentioned specified qualities as prerequisites:

They [the electors] cast votes for all the princes who were sons of lords; men [at arms]; brave warriors, experienced in war, who shrank not from the enemy; who knew not wine—who were not drunkards, who became not stupefied; the prudent, able, wise; of sound and righteous rearing and upbringing; who spoke well and were obedient, benevolent, discreet, and intelligent.³⁴³

Bravery during battle could lead to a change of social status: warriors who provided captives for sacrifice enjoyed higher ranks and privileges. The

³⁴⁰ Clendinnen 2010: 16.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 11-12.

³⁴³ Sahagún 1950-1982: VIII: 61.

majority of Aztec men were merely part-time warriors - after campaigns they returned to the trade of their fathers: farming, hunting, fishing, and other crafts. Few commoners had the chance to improve their living conditions and climb in the social hierarchy due to their military success. Joining in and moving through the ranks of the warrior grades depended entirely on taking alive a certain number of captives of specified quality.

Each promotion was followed by a change of ornaments and insignia. Commoners who distinguished themselves were able to graduate to the lower ranks of royal administration and had access to the luxury goods, which they could later distribute among the family and friends.³⁴⁴ The architects of the Aztec Empire: the royal adviser Tlacaelel together with the *tlatoani* Itzcoatl introduced a new set of sumptuary laws, which limited and controlled the access to the most luxurious ornaments, clothing and war equipment; they could not be simply bought in the marketplace, but were “purchased” only with courageous acts on the battlefield.³⁴⁵

Young Aztec men were given this incentive in order to pursue military career and fulfil their obligations on the battlefield with eagerness and zeal; in the same time they were constantly under enormous social pressure since their performance would determine their entire life. The cost of failure was very public and extremely high. Every Aztec boy grew a lock of hair at the nape of the neck, which remained uncut until the young man had taken a captive on the battlefield; if he had not succeeded in doing so after three campaigns, the

³⁴⁴ Clendinnen 2010: 9-10.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 13.

“warrior lock” was cut off, the rest of the hair was shaved in a tonsure, and he was condemned to spend the rest of his life like a humble commoner.³⁴⁶

In this context the figure of Titlacauan and his *ixiptla* appeared rather ambiguous: although he was an adult man and a former warrior, his appearance during the year-long performance indicated his sexual and social immaturity.³⁴⁷ During these months the *ixiptla* remained in the liminal phase not only due to his changed status of the entity in-between with his former identity taken away from him; the ambiguous figure of Titlacauan implied the liminality as well.

This peculiar position was further complicated by the fact that both gods to whom Toxcatl was dedicated - Tezcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli - were warrior gods. The ritual importance of warfare was closely connected to mature sexuality and reflected in the bodily aesthetics of the warriors, whose ranks were marked by haircuts and uniform ornaments.³⁴⁸ The war captives who played gods transformed themselves into beings in between humans and deities, possessing great power but lacking the possibility of freeing themselves from captivity and preventing their sacrifice.³⁴⁹ The *ixiptla* of Titlacauan underwent several metamorphoses during his life as the living image of god, the last one being a rite of passage transforming the young man into a mature and seasoned warrior through a change of costume, haircut, and ornaments. His liminality put him in the position between god

³⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 16.

³⁴⁷ Based on the fact that the selection of the captive for Toxcatl required his body unblemished, it is safe to assume that he was a relatively young and inexperienced warrior caught during his first or second venture into battlefield. For the description of a typical course of military career see: Sahagún 1950-1982: VIII: 175.

³⁴⁸ Sigal 2011: 148.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 151.

and human, lord and slave, sexually inexperienced adolescent and mature adult warrior. Finally, the rite of passage conveyed a deeper mythological meaning: the sexually ambiguous Titlacauan was transformed into Tezcatlipoca – the warrior.

4.3.2. Titlacauan’s sexuality

The sexuality of Titlacauan’s *ixiptla* has been discussed in the recent years. It refers to the concepts of gender roles and sexuality in the Nahua culture and it had provoked creative reinterpretations of the primary sources on Aztec daily life and customs. Some of the theories proposed by the scholars who deal with gender topics are worth looking into, since they broaden the spectrum of Toxcatl analysis and suggest new, interesting points of reference.

Careful analysis of the head and body ornaments leads some researchers to the conclusion that the feathers which decorated the head of the *ixiptla* of Titlacauan during Toxcatl (before his final metamorphosis into the adult warrior Tezcatlipoca) were a form of ornamentation used first on children during the ear-piercing ceremony in the month of Izcalli.³⁵⁰ During the festivals of Tlacaxipehualiztli and Miccailhuitontli (Tlaxochimaco) young men danced ornamented with eagle down on their heads, wearing flowers garlands and a cape of flowers, *oyoalli* bells on their legs, and shell jewellery – the costume similar to that worn by the *ixiptla* of Titlacauan before his “marriage” to four goddesses. A similar costume may be observed on a stone relief representing Coyolxauhqui in the Templo Mayor Museum – the goddess

³⁵⁰ Joyce 2000: 155.

who fought against and was defeated by her younger brother Huitzilopochtli.³⁵¹ Rosemary A. Joyce suggested that these figures shared a similar liminal status in their life cycle – that between child and adult; in all these cases the costume implied their social immaturity and their lack of permanent sexual definition.³⁵²

Cecelia F. Klein stated that Nahuatl-speaking people perceived gender neither as immutable nor stable or inherently bipolar, and that gender could be determined socially and supernaturally. Gender ambiguity, under right conditions, could facilitate necessary change at least on four occasions in the calendar, each marking the end of one important astronomical period or season, “the time of cosmic danger” – one of those occasions was the Toxcatl festival.³⁵³ The androgynous figure of Titlacauan signified the return to the chaos of undifferentiated unity that preceded the creation; his sexuality was immature, asocial, and unpredictable, fundamentally opposite to that of the ideal (married) man.³⁵⁴

Such interpretations imply that the term “maturity”, as opposed to “immaturity” displayed by the *ixiptla* of Titlacauan, refers to the state that the *ixiptla* symbolically achieved after the final transformation: adulthood combined with battle experience, military achievements, and sexual maturity. “Mature sexuality” would imply accepting gender roles and assuming a position that agreed with such divisions – a decorated war veteran, a husband, a heterosexual lover. The liminality of the *ixiptla* would

³⁵¹ Ibid., p. 158.

³⁵² Ibid., p. 166.

³⁵³ Klein 2001: 184-185.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 225, 227.

have been indicated by his chaste lifestyle, costume and body ornamentation. This type of sexuality was strictly controlled by state and culture and was manifested through certain aspects of physical appearance by both sexes: dress code and hairstyle.

One of the most daring and intriguing theories on the sexuality of Titlacauan and his *ixiptla* states that he was in fact a manifestation of Tezcatlipoca as a passive homosexual.³⁵⁵ The most comprehensive approach can be found in Pete Sigal's work on Nahua sexuality: it addresses Trexler's statement that Titlacauan reflected on the aspect of Tezcatlipoca as "*a passive male whore (puto)*".³⁵⁶ Sigal referred to a caption from the fourth volume of the *Florentine Codex* in which Tezcatlipoca was called a "faggot"; he argued that the Nahuatl term *cuiloni*, which in his opinion refers to "someone taken from behind", was incorrectly translated by the Spaniards as *puto* and received a derogatory connotation not intended by the Nahuatl speakers.³⁵⁷

Sigal argued that homosexuality and cross-dressing was present and accepted in Nahua culture, the fact which was reflected by rituals engaging male homosexuals and transvestites. Sigal used the figure of Titlacauan portrayed in the *Florentine Codex* to prove his point: the god wore only a loincloth, sandals, and a knotted rope that appeared to ensnare him.

³⁵⁵ Trexler 1995; Sigal 2007, 2011.

³⁵⁶ Sigal 2011. Trexler 1995: 103.

³⁵⁷ (...) „*tu tezcatlipoca eres un puto*“, see: Sahagún 1950-1982: IV: 24. Sigal 2011: 193. The "nefarious sin" of sodomy was frequently attributed to the inhabitants of subjugated territories by Christian conquistadors and missionaries in an attempt to justify the conquest and subsequent conversion; accusing the defeated men of engaging in homosexual intercourse would not only present them as weak, passive, and effeminate (therefore humiliating them even more in the eyes of European male invaders) but also support the claim that such "abominable practices" had to be banned by further use of force and state-mandated violence.

Titlacauan carried a flower and a smoking pipe; he also blew on a flute.³⁵⁸ According to Sigal, the flower signified fertility and excessive eroticism, whereas the flute was an obvious phallic reference.³⁵⁹ The snare symbolized sexual transgressions and was associated with intestines, which Sigal considered an allusion to anal intercourse.³⁶⁰

This theory does not explain the point behind the year-long performance of the *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca-Titlacauan. Assuming that he was in fact the manifestation of the more subtle and delicate side of the warrior god Tezcatlipoca, it is highly doubtful that he would still serve as a paragon of Aztec beauty and culture – not because of his alleged homosexuality, which did not necessarily possess negative connotation in the Nahuatl culture, but due to the fact that sexual excess, supposedly symbolized by a flower carried by the *ixiptla*, was definitely associated with negative qualities.

4.3.3. Titlacauan and sexual excess

The flower carried by Titlacauan was believed by some modern commentators to signify sexual desire and excess; flowers were frequently carried by prostitutes and ornamented them according to the *Florentine Codex*.³⁶¹ Sexual excess was considered a serious and grave transgression in the Nahuatl culture: the gloss of the traditional wisdom of Aztecs – the *huehuetlatolli* – frequently instructed young men and women to avoid promiscuity at all costs and to remain chaste until marriage.³⁶² The ideal of

³⁵⁸ Sahagún 1950-1982: I: figure 38.

³⁵⁹ Sigal 2011: 191.

³⁶⁰ Klein 1990-1991; Sigal 2011: 191.

³⁶¹ Sigal 2007: 22. Sahagún 1950-1982: XI.

³⁶² Sahagún 1950-1982: VI.

proper conduct included such qualities as temperance, moderation, and patience – giving up to lust would only increase the desire. Excess was associated with chaos, the domain of Tezcatlipoca; the omniscient trickster god could see mortals involving in adultery and premarital sexual relations because he was able to look into their hearts.³⁶³ His anger would bring dire consequences to those who committed a transgression.³⁶⁴

For the Aztecs transgression consisted of disturbing the social order. Young girls were expected to remain virgins until their wedding to ensure that the line of succession would be free of suspicion; they were warned against the repercussions of the premature loss of virginity, such as the lack of marital love and trust.³⁶⁵ Adolescent boys were forewarned by their fathers that giving up to carnal lust in such a tender age could cause future impotence and prevent them from “growing up properly” or even to make them grow old prematurely.³⁶⁶ Youngsters were advised to curb their appetite for sex, resist the urge and wait for the right moment – when they reach physical and

³⁶³ „[Tezcatlipoca] el que conoce todos los pensamientos, que esta en todas partes y penetra los corazones“ (Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas 1965: 86).

³⁶⁴ “And take heed: even if none see thee (...), take heed, for the lord of the near, of the night, seeth thee. He will become angered, he will awaken the anger of the common folk, he will take vengeance. For thee he will require that which he will desire, perhaps paralysis, or blindness, or rottenness” (Sahagún 1950-1982: VI: 102-103). Interestingly, the punishment executed by Tezcatlipoca bears similarities to symptoms of several venereal diseases.

³⁶⁵ Quezada 1975: 48. “If still thou hast not been good, if already thou art a woman [and] somewhere thou hast been asked for, never wilt thou be at peace with another, fir it will always be remembered of thee; it will always cause thy misery, thy torment. Never wilt thou achieve peace, never tranquility. Thy helpmate, thy husband, will always suspect” (Sahagún 1950-1982: VI: 102).

The Spanish language version is even more precise: “Si perdieras tu virginidad y después desto te demandare por mujer alguno y te casaras con él, nunca se habrá bien contigo ni te tendrá verdadero amor. Siempre se acordará de que no te halló virgen, y esto te será causa de gran aflicción y trabajo. Nunca estarás en paz; siempre estará tu marido sospechoso de ti” (Sahagún 1988: 372).

³⁶⁶ “And if thou ruinest thyself impetuously, if too soon thou seduces, thou discoverest [women] on earth (...), thou wilt interrupt thy development (...). Possibly already thou wilt linger a short time on earth, very soon to be old, old and wrinkled” (Sahagún 1950-1982: VI: 117).

social maturity.³⁶⁷ Those who took a wife were supposed to spend their sexual energy on satisfying her; they were explicitly told that weakening their libido through excessive premarital affairs could lead to marital infidelity because an unsatisfied wife was more likely to take a lover.³⁶⁸ Clearly the Aztecs perceived sexual energy and libido as something that could have been exhausted and depleted; the only way for an Aztec man to save it for its proper use (producing healthy and strong offspring, marital satisfaction) was through moderation and temperance in impressionable teenage years.

Although the flower carried by the *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca-Itlilacauan could have signified eroticism and sexual desire, it is highly doubtful that it was also associated with sexual excess by the Aztecs. The living image of Itlilacauan was neither bisexual, nor sexually ambiguous; his final transformation from an immature young male into a fully-matured warrior represented consecutive stages of life rather than ambivalent sexuality and transgressions.

The liminality of the *ixiptla* was initiated in the moment of his selection from the group of other war prisoners; during the year he spent as a representative of the deity he incorporated the desirable qualities of a young man undergoing his training and preparing for his first battle. He was a skilful dancer and a singer, he performed vigil and fasting, and occasionally

³⁶⁷ “And well wilt thou enter into thy mundane life, thy carnal life: in thy carnal life thou wilt be rugged, strong, swift; diligent wilt thou be” (Sahagún 1950-1982: VI: 117).

³⁶⁸ “Perhaps it is so with thee, a man, when already thou consumest thyself, when thou canst no longer say anything, no longer do anything to thy spouse. Soon she hateth thee, soon she detesteth thee; for verily thou starvest her. Perhaps presently there ariseth her desire; she longeth for the carnal relations which thou owest thy spouse. Already thou art finished, thou hast completed all. Perhaps thou art incapable. She will ignore thee, she will betray thee. Verily, thou hast ruined thyself impetuously, thou hast consumed thyself.” (Sahagún 1950-1982: VI: 117).

he provided entertainment in the houses of the Aztec nobility. All that time he was carefully supervised by eight men: four of them made vows to Huitzilopochtli and fasted for a year, the remaining four were warriors who instructed youth in the art of war in the *telpochcalli*.³⁶⁹ The entourage turned the attention of the viewers into two important aspects of the *ixiptla*'s performance: penitence (vigil and fasting), and warrior training.

Although it had not been explicitly stated in the primary sources, many modern commentators assume that the *ixiptla* remained chaste under such a careful supervision, and that he was allowed sexual relations only after the symbolic rite of passage, represented by the change of garments, ornaments, and hairstyle. The transformed *ixiptla* was given four "wives", also living images of goddesses, and he lived with them for the remaining twenty days. Based on the fact that before the metamorphosis the *ixiptla* signified sexual and social immaturity and that he represented a young man in training, his chastity seems very plausible. His death coincided with the completion of temple service, after which young men and women were ready to choose a spouse. During the service significant attention was paid to penance, fasting and vigil; sexual relations among the cloistered youth were strictly prohibited and severely punished. In this context the *ixiptla*, who symbolized a young Aztec male, was most likely to abstain from carnal relations as well and in this way he could have served as a paragon.

The period of abstinence came officially to an end twenty days before the final sacrifice, when the *ixiptla* underwent the change of physical appearance and was granted four women, each representing a different goddess:

³⁶⁹ Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 66.

Xochiquetzal (patron of beauty, female sex power, motherhood and pregnancy), Xilonen (also known as Chicomecoatl, deity of maize and nourishment), Atlatonan (goddess of the lakeshore and patron of motherhood) and Uixtocihuatl (patron of salty waters and salt).³⁷⁰ He was allowed to have sexual relations with these women during his final days and his transformation was therefore complete: he was a mature, adult man who achieved certain degree of success on the battlefield (demonstrated by his attire and haircut) and could not take a wife.

Due to the fact that a polygamist marriage was reserved for members of the Aztec nobility only, it can be deduced that the *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca-Titlacauan represented this part of the Aztec society rather than a “common man”. The fact that he had four lovers could be also attributed to his divine nature: as a carrier of the divine essence, or at least part of it, the *ixiptla* was not limited by the rules of mortals and could enjoy the privileges of the highest strata – numerous wives and concubines.

4.3.4. *Ixiptla* as a paragon of perfect conduct

The analysis of the social aspect of *ixiptla*'s performance must take into account its total duration; the transformations of the *ixiptla* represent various periods in the life of a “perfect Aztec male”. The stages and their characteristic features are as follows:

³⁷⁰ Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 67.

1. entering the liminal phase (selection; relinquishing former life as a warrior and a prisoner status; becoming a vessel for Tezcatlipoca's essence; becoming Tezcatlipoca-*Titlacauan*),
2. the "immature phase" (adolescent boy on the brink of adulthood; undergoing training; performing fasting, vigil, and penance; possible sexual abstinence; focus on arts and physical perfection; being an epitome of innocent youth and beauty; social activities in the company of guardians),
3. the "adult phase" (rite of passage; becoming Tezcatlipoca – the warrior; becoming an adult; receiving high rank for battlefield achievements – capturing four live prisoners; marriage and sex; possible offspring; journey through the ritual landscape; social activities in the company of women and guardians),
4. exiting the liminal phase (breaking the flutes/contact with the sphere of sacrum; isolation; sacrifice and completing the ideal life of a warrior in with honourable death; returning the piece of divine essence to Tezcatlipoca).

Evidently, the metamorphoses of the living image of Tezcatlipoca-*Titlacauan* formed a certain pattern: it was the sequence representing the ideal life of an Aztec man. It is necessary to remember that the Aztecs often turned to didactic discourse and created "ideal figures" in their speeches (the *huehuetlatolli*) and rituals; their paragons were often taken to the extreme and they appeared detached from the reality to the European mind.

The “exorbitant” measures taken in Aztec rituals helped them express abstract concepts in their full extent. The death of the perfect warrior during the Toxcatl festival did not mean that every Aztec male was expected to die on the sacrificial altar; it was merely a histrionic epitome of a “beautiful life” as well as a “beautiful death”. It encompassed various stages of male education and upbringing, glorified the warrior as the contemporary icon, and encouraged young men to lead a moderate life filled with the sense of duty, obligation, temperance and patience. In this “ideal society” men would pursue military career and contribute to the perpetual expansion, conquest and tributary exploitation of subjugated provinces. Every able-bodied adult man in the Triple Alliance was required to perform military service, even the landless peasants (priests being a notable exception); Toxcatl provided them with a curious art of war propaganda. It was a festival dedicated to warrior gods Tezcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli; it glorified warrior life and celebrated the cult of masculinity in all its phases – from a young adult to a seasoned warrior – and encouraged men to bravery on the battlefield – for the glory of Tenochtitlan as well as for personal profit.

5.0. Titlacauan vs. Tlacauepan

Modern commentators tend to pay little or no attention to the other male *ixiptla* who participated in the Toxcatl festival – Tlacauepan, also called Ixteucalc and Teicautzin.³⁷¹ However, the figure of Ixteucalc-Tlacauepan, whose performance stood in vivid contrast to the life of the *ixiptla* of

³⁷¹ “Ojos del Señor de la Casa Divina, ò del Señor Divino de la Casa”. Torquemada 1969: 256. Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 73.

Tezcatlipoca-Titlacauan, sets them both in an interesting context: that of the duality of cultural refinement versus “barbarity” in the Aztec understanding of the term.

The *ixiptla* of Titlacauan could have been considered an example of the process of cultural development, of accepting and internalizing social norms, and a paragon of artistic sophistication and adolescent beauty: he manifested his proficiency in “cultural” matters – song, dance and courtly behaviour. His year-long performance was in fact a time consuming process consisting of multiple transformations and leading to the state of “male perfection” and social advancement. Ixteucale-Tlacauepan’s performance stood in obvious opposition to this elaborate display of wealth, social connections, and beauty – the *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca-Titlacauan embodied everything that the other obviously wasn’t.

Since there is no information on the origin or former social status of the candidates for the position of Ixteucale, it is assumed they were common slaves; they were either impoverished landless peasants sold to slavery or children of such. After being chosen for the part they did not undergo an extensive training in war craft and arts, at least not mentioned in the primary sources. Their attire was far more modest than the exquisite costumes of Titlacauan – the *ixiptla* of Ixteucale-Tlacauepan wore black paper disks as raiment, a strip of fur on his arm, and he was covered by a simple net mantle.³⁷² His whole appearance seemed dishevelled and

³⁷² „ (...) his [ornament like a priest’s] maniple hung from his arm. It was of the skin of a wild beast“ (Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 73). The “maniple” probably indicated the similarity to a Catholic priest rather than an Aztec one; back in those times clerics used to wear a strip of silk over their left arm. The mantle was similar, if not identical to that worn by Titlacauan

indicated his low and humble status. Not much is said about his activities apart from the fact that he guided common people to a “serpent dance” during Toxcatl and subsequently went to the place where he would be sacrificed, namely a “tribal” temple of Huitzilopochtli called Huitznahuac.³⁷³ He died in a similar fashion as Titlacauan’s *ixiptla* and his head was strung on the skull rack.

The austere life and modest attire of Ixteucale-Tlacauepan’s representative was a deliberate manoeuvre stressing his apparent brutality, primitive nature and savagery: in Tenochtitlan all those qualities were usually attributed to Chichimecs - hunters-gatherers who arrived in the Valley of Mexico in the period after the fall of the Toltec culture.³⁷⁴ Since the ancestors of Mexica-Tenochca appeared in the Valley in the same time, they considered themselves to be partial descendants of those fierce wild warriors and therefore presented the early stage of their history (before the rise to glory) as the “Chichimec phase”, a period of political turmoil, instability and conflicts with neighbours.

Every *tlatoani* that preceded Itzcoatl was considered to be a “Chichimec leader”, which indicated that Itzcoatl together with his chief advisor Tlacaelel were the architects of the new, improved and culturally developed Tenochtitlan, a city-state that was mature enough to free itself from shackles of tribute and political submission.³⁷⁵ This was marked by a

on the aforementioned illustration in the Florentine Codex. This further proves that Sigal’s theory of Titlacauan’s passive homosexuality was unsubstantiated since Tlacauepan’s cape obviously symbolized his humble position, and not his sexually submissive position.

³⁷³ Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 69.

³⁷⁴ It is possible that the Chichimec invasion contributed to the fall of the Toltec culture.

³⁷⁵ Gillespie 1989

transformation from a dependent “savage” state into a cultural, political and economic hub – Tenochtitlan “matured”, “seasoned”, and became more sophisticated. Itzcoatl intended to stronger associate Aztec nobility with the ruling houses of neo-Toltec cities (like Culhuacan) and claim the right to call themselves the descendants of the Toltecs, the heirs to their cultural heritage and political legacy. The transition from a savage “Chichimec” to a polished “Toltec” initiated the rise of the Aztec Empire.

In this context the contrast between the two *ixiptlas* becomes even more pronounced: Ixteucale-Tlacauepan signified the primitive past and savage origins of Tenochtitlan, whereas Titlacauan represented its refinement and advancement. The charismatic leadership of a Chichimec “*hombre-dios*” developed into an official post of the *tlatoani* who also claimed the ability to communicate with the patron deity and to command his will on earth. However, the tribal god Huitzilopochtli was too “unpolished” and too “Chichimec” to suit imperial purposes and therefore he was replaced by a more suitable Toltec god Tezcatlipoca. In reality, those two deities seem to share many traits and it could have been the intention of Tenochtitlan’s chief ideologists: both deities were warriors which led their people through a figure of the elected ruler. They were paired and honoured both during Toxcatl in Tenochtitlan, the festival which referred to the Aztec past, present and future. A tribal deity had been elevated to a higher status and appeared along with the popular Mesoamerican god; the people of Tenochtitlan left their primitive humble past behind and embarked on the journey to imperial glory; the ruler remained connected to the god, although his office became more formal and prestigious.

6.0. Ritual landscape outside Tenochtitlan

The places visited by the *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca-Titlacauan have not yet been extensively analyzed by the modern commentators and they deserve to be a subject of a separate publication; since the information on some of these locations is scarce or unclear, it is difficult to determine the exact purpose of the trips that the representative accompanied by his entourage made in his final days.

Tecanman was a place of cult dedicated to the ancient Mesoamerican fire god Xiuhtecuhtli-Huehuetētl (“The Old God”) associated with ideas of purification, transformation and regeneration of the world through fire. It is not surprising that the divine representative of Tezcatlipoca-Titlacauan visited his shrine after undergoing several powerful transformations, but before regenerating the essence of Tezcatlipoca through sacrifice. The next place visited was a private shrine of Titlacauan in an undisclosed location;³⁷⁶ the *ixiptla* performed together with his women before the statue of the god he himself was impersonating.

Next on his agenda was a visit to Tepetzinco, an island famous for its volcanic thermal baths and frequented by the Aztec nobility. According to Mexica-Tenochca legends, the wandering tribe that later went to become the inhabitants of Tenochtitlan used to live on this island for a short period of time. The story reveals that during those years an evil sorcerer Copil sought revenge on the tribal god Huitzilopochtli for the banishment of his mother Malinalxochitl; it was said that both mother and son plotted against the god

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

and his dedicated followers. Huitzilopochtli ordered Copil's death, which took place on the island; the victim's blood was spilled on the stone floor created the famous hot springs. The heart of the sorcerer was thrown into the lake and the legend claimed that it was transformed into a nopal cactus, on which an eagle built his nests; the same nopal cactus and the eagle later showed the Mexica where to build Tenochtitlan.³⁷⁷ *Ixiptla*'s presence in this location could have served propaganda purposes because it referred to the mythical origins of Tenochtitlan and reminded of the part that the tribal god Huitzilopochtli paid in the creation of the city.

The reasons behind the trip to Tepepulco are not entirely clear; archaeological evidence indicates that the principal religious structure in the area was the so-called Pyramid of the Tecolote (Owl Pyramid) that could indicate the cult place of Tezcatlipoca (owl being a nocturnal animal frequently associated with this particular deity).³⁷⁸

From this site the group moved in canoes toward Acaquilpan-Caualtepec where they landed and separated: the women were forced to bid goodbye to the *ixiptla* and returned to Tenochtitlan, whereas the young man travelled to a small temple called Tlacoachcalco ("House of Darts") near Tlapitzahuayan.³⁷⁹

According to the Aztec legends and historical chronicles, the Mexica had resided in Tlapitzahuayan for 10 years, long before they established

³⁷⁷ Aveleyra Arroyo de Anda 2005

³⁷⁸ Kelly 2001

³⁷⁹ Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 68.

Tenochtitlan.³⁸⁰ During that time the city had already been part of the state of Chalco, a loose confederation of communities that had been organized into four *altepeme* by a legendary Chichimec ruler Xolotl.³⁸¹ Chalco possessed a complex ethnic structure and cultivated many Toltec traditions; the cult of Tezcatlipoca, who was the principal Chalca deity, was also part of the Toltec legacy. The small shrine of Tezcatlipoca in Tlacoachcalco was not the most important temple of this god in the confederation, since it was overshadowed by the ceremonial centers in Amaquemecan and Tlalmanalco.³⁸² However, it used to hold a special place in the Mexica history due to its association with the “wandering period”. It is possible that the Mexica-Tenochca chose this location as the endpoint of the *ixiptla*’s journey because of its historical significance.

Due to the prolonged period of military hostilities between Chalco and Tenochtitlan this area became accessible to the latter only after 1465 and

³⁸⁰ Chimalpahin 1997: 89.

³⁸¹ Chimalpahin 2001:111.

The four *altepeme* constituting the Chalco province were: Tlalmanalco Tlacoachcalco, Amaquemecan, Tenanco Texopalco Tepopolla y Chimalhuacán-Chalco. Three of them were ruled by Chichimecs, the fourth by a neo-Toltec *tlatoani*. Eventually Tlalmanalco and Amaquemecan became the most influential communities of the province and remained prominent political centers until their defeat by the Triple Alliance forces in consequence of the Chalco War (1452-1465).

Chalco was a long-standing enemy of the Mexica; hostilities between the two went back as far as the beginning of Mexica presence in the Valley of Mexico. The conflict culminated in the long war, which left Chalco submitted and devastated, with its main temples destroyed. The survivors were subjected to compulsory service and forced to erect new houses for the Aztec nobility; most of them fell victim to starvation.

³⁸² According to Chimalpahin, the site known as Amaquemecan was previously inhabited by indigenous people called Cocolca, who worshipped a god called Red Jaguar and built his temple on the western slopes of the volcano Popocatepetl. After forcibly taking over the land from the Cocolca and establishing their own city of Amaquemecan, the Chalca identified Red Jaguar with their patron god Tezcatlipoca and adapted the temple for his cult (Chimalpahin 2001: 51).

The name Amaquemecan derives from a legendary place in which the Chichimec leader Xolotl was born; it was considered to be synonymous with the mythic Aztlan, the place of origin of both the Mexica and the Chalca. Most probably the mountain site where the shrine used to stand is known today as Sacromonte in the town of Amecameca; is famous for its Ash Wednesday celebrations which include many indigenous, prehispanic elements.

the subsequent conquest of Chalco by the Triple Alliance forces. It is likely that the last part of the Toxcatl ritual – the journey of the *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca-Itlilacauan and his entourage during the five final days of the *veintena* – was a relatively “recent” element and it became part of the ceremony approximately 50 years before the collapse of the Aztec Empire (assuming that it started directly after the conquest of the Chalco province). The festival may have undergone many transformations and adapted to changing sociopolitical circumstances. New ritual activities could have been introduced to its scenario, as well as new locations such as the ceremonial site which predated the settlement of Tenochtitlan was linked to the Toltec legacy via the Chichimec tradition of Chalco. It would be the perfect location for a festival which reflected on the complex nature of the Aztec Empire, its multicultural heritage, and the noble Toltec background.

All these influences were personified by the *huey tlatoani* of Tenochtitlan and the divine representative of Tezcatlipoca-Itlilacauan; the origin of Tezcatlipoca’s cult went back to the Toltec culture and the same could be said about Tenochtitlan’s claim to political power over the subjugated people of the Valley of Mexico. By introducing trips to the ceremonial agenda of the *ixiptla* during Toxcatl, the Aztecs recalled their past and reaffirmed their claim to rule, reminding themselves and their opponents of their long history and their Toltec heritage.

7.0. Ceremonies in the tribal districts

The sacrifice of the *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca-Itlilacauan is usually presented as the main event during the festival of Toxcatl. However, the activities and

ceremonies that took place outside the sacred precinct reveal many interesting features which were equally, if not more important for the community.³⁸³

The rituals dedicated to Huitzilopochtli were celebrated in the “tribal district” and they involved common people as well as the nobles, priests, and warriors.³⁸⁴ The location of these “additional” activities reveals an important aspect of Toxcatl in Tenochtitlan – the festival focused not only on the nobility and warrior caste, but also on singular districts and their common inhabitants, which actively participated in the ceremony. They danced along the warriors and the masters of youth during the serpent dance, they offered quails and burned incense at home, and more importantly, they could observe the sacrifice of Tlacauepan’s *ixiptla* in the temple pyramid called Huitznahuac; the sacrifice was not hidden from their eyes or shrouded in mystery like the death of Titlacauan in some remote, secluded place, but rather displayed for all to see. The *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca-Titlacauan “saturated the world with his presence” before he disappeared from the public view, while the image of Tlacauepan remained visible in his final moments.³⁸⁵

³⁸³ See: Chapter 2, p. 26-30, 47-57.

³⁸⁴ Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 69.

³⁸⁵ An interesting reference to the „glorious, voluntary death” of the *ixiptla* of Tlacauepan can be found in the revised and “politically correct” version of the Aztec history, written by Aztec ideologists; the chronicles mention another man bearing that name, the younger brother of *tlatoani* Moctezuma I Ilhuicamina.

According to the official Tenochca history, the brave seasoned warrior Tlacauepan was captured and imprisoned by the Chalca during the Chalco War (1452-1465); his exceptional accomplishments and fame intimidated the Chalca to the point where they offered him title and wealth in order to make him a head of a Mexica puppet-government-in-exile. His acceptance would pose a serious threat to the political stability of Tenochtitlan. Tlacauepan pretended to accept enemy’s offer and asked the Chalca to erect an excessively high platform for him. Once having climbed the platform, he jumped to his death. Such example

The involvement of a unit in the ceremony was best exemplified during the quail and incense sacrifice, which was supervised and initiated by the *tlatoani* himself. The people who gathered on the temple square followed the ruler in beheading the birds, although the meat was reserved for nobles and priests who were present at the site. The commoners carried on with the festivities in the privacy of their own houses, where they dined in a family circle and offered incense to gods. After the meal and offering they came back to the square and remained there as viewers until the end of the festivities.

Another significant feature of the ceremony in the tribal district was the traditional dance performed by young temple servants of both sexes.³⁸⁶ The month of Toxcatl marked the end of their year-long duty and seclusion; both young men and women were now considered socially mature and ready for marriage. The ritual dances and songs provided young people with a rare opportunity to catch a glimpse of the members of the opposite sex, although any form of intimate physical contact or flirtation remained strictly forbidden.

Given that the Aztec youth was submitted to various kinds of time-consuming training and education from a very early age, such encounters were generally carefully controlled and supervised. Mandatory evening schools of song and dance, frequented by Aztec teenagers of both sexes,

of patriotic virtues and courage awed the Chalca and provided Tlacauepan with a place in the heroic pantheon of Tenochtitlan (Tovar 1979).

The sacrifice of the *ixiptla* bears one similarity to this legendary feat: the *ixiptla* was allegedly allowed to choose the moment of his death and climbed the steps of the pyramid when he himself decided to be ready. By this act he demonstrated his self-control and courage.

³⁸⁶ Sahagūn 1950-1982: II: 71-73.

provided an environment for social interactions in addition to preparing the youth for the participation in numerous rituals. For the ones submitted to temple service and extended period of strict abstinence and fasting, Toxcatl celebrations in the tribal district signified a chance to watch their prospective partners during dances and establish first contacts with those who caught their interest.

The Toxcatl festival in Tenochtitlan displayed a clear erotic undertone: it featured a beautiful young male destined for sacrifice, in addition to involving young, sexually repressed and heavily guarded people in its rituals. The sexuality of the *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca-Titlacauan was also submitted to restrictions and supervision; the period of time in which he was allowed sexual relations with women was defined by the ritual and its prerequisites – consecutive transformations marking the change in his social status – and only after fulfilling these requirements was the *ixiptla* permitted to engage briefly in carnal relations with partners not of his own choosing. His physical appearance had been arranged by the guardians, priests, and tradition; his urges and needs had been suppressed; his sexual release had been meticulously planned beforehand without his consent. This level of control over sexuality was mirrored by the young people leaving temples and joining the ceremonial activities in the tribal district during Toxcatl; their erotic curiosity and urges had been previously suppressed, if not vehemently forbidden and discouraged.

Toxcatl marked the end of both a period of harvest and penance; it signified ripeness, maturity, culmination, and hinted at imminent erotic fulfillment.

Nevertheless, the promise of fulfillment came with a number of restrictions and limitations: Aztec life and sexuality was presented as a battle of chaos against the forces of order. The polished, refined, and trained *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca-Titlacauan was juxtaposed with the brute, coarse, and “primitive” Ixteucale-Tlacauepan; the culture and elegance fought against violence, brutality and submission to basic urges.

The ceremonies in Huitznahuac displayed vividly the contrast between the ideal of harmonic life of perfect discipline and skill, embodied by the elusive Titlacauan, and the rough, barbaric nomad warrior Tlacauepan, a vision from the not-so-distant Chichimec past, still present in the rituals of the tribal district. The vision of an ideal warrior (skilled, seasoned, accomplished, and disciplined) reflected on the qualities which were desired by the state for itself - the perfection achieved through repetition, training, abstinence, and consequence.

The Chichimec Tlacauepan served as a reminder of the fierce and unorganized hunter-gatherers who, according to the glorifying Mexica legends, built the city of Tenochtitlan thanks to their indomitable spirit and tenacity. According to the Tenochca that ferociousness had to be carefully controlled in order to create an advanced society; the possibilities of release had to be limited to tame the wild, unruly Chichimec spirit. However, the threat of uncontrollable outburst was always present in the collective Tenochca subconsciousness; the risk was especially high during some of the astronomic and calendric events, Toxcatl being one of them. The original festival of the changing seasons rearranged the cosmic order; the contact

between the sphere of sacrum and the mortal plane had been briefly disrupted by the *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca-Titlacauan breaking his flutes during the ascent to the temple pyramid. The forces of chaos were stronger during such periods and therefore the mortals had to take special precautions and remain careful.

8.0. Confession and penance

In *The Ancient Calendar* Fray Diego Durán described a special event which occurred every four years during the Toxcatl festival – general remission of transgressions supervised by the omniscient and omnipresent Tezcatlipoca.³⁸⁷ The deity was generally believed to be able to look into the hearts of mortals and to expose every single misdeed that they had committed. People who were guilty of various crimes or less grave transgressions, but who were not yet discovered, prayed to Tezcatlipoca in order to keep their deeds a secret and performed various acts of penance, including self-mutilation, fasting, and bloodletting.

The main difference between the Judeo-Christian concept of sin and the Aztec idea of transgression was the fact that the latter was believed to influence everyday life instead of the afterlife; every action which was considered immoral or harmful to the social order could bring dire consequences to the transgressor in the immediate or distant future, depending on caprices of Tezcatlipoca. Such shameful acts were not expected to be forgiven by the omniscient god since the Aztecs did not know the concept of a confession concluded with complete absolution. Instead,

³⁸⁷ Durán 1971: 98-102.

Tezcatlipoca required from his followers to participate in certain acts of penance in order to keep their secrets hidden from the public.³⁸⁸

According to the Aztec worldview, those who did not show signs of remorse and did not regret their crimes risked Tezcatlipoca's anger, which could manifest in sickness, poverty, pestilence or simply public outing of the crime and the subsequent punishment.

Durán claimed that it was Tezcatlipoca's priest who played the flute in four cardinal directions to signalize the beginning of penitence and offering.³⁸⁹ As it was established in Chapter 2, it is more likely that the impersonator of Tezcatlipoca initiated these activities.³⁹⁰ Durán further described that on hearing the notes of the flute ordinary people smeared their fingers with dirt and ate it; they prostrated themselves and begged Tezcatlipoca for mercy, guidance, and alleviation of the hard labors of their mortal lives. Thieves, fornicators, murderers, and other kinds of "sinners" were filled with "dread and sadness" and prayed for their crimes to go unpunished and unrevealed; they offered incense and performed penance. Even warriors prayed in that

³⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 102.

Durán pointed out that such attitude towards sin posed a problem during Catholic confession due to the fact that the Aztecs feared such direct admissions; they believed that revealing their sins would bring them harm and punishment. The task of convincing them otherwise fell to the Spanish missionaries; Durán appealed to the Church officials and asked them not to threaten the natives during confession since it would result in the exact opposite of their goal.

Instead of menacing frightened "sinners", Durán proposed acting with kindness and patience; furthermore, he suggested that the members of clergy who acted with unnecessary brutality and severity should be judged by the Inquisition.

His attitude proves that even though the Spanish friar was biased toward native beliefs, he was able to display certain degree of understanding and tolerance, in addition to correctly pinpointing the source of some problems, which resulted from various cultural differences between the Spaniards and the conquered Aztecs.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., p.101.

³⁹⁰ See: Chapter 2, p. 40-41.

moment and asked Tezcatlipoca for victory, strength, courage, and war captives.³⁹¹

There are no written primary sources which would indicate that the confessional aspect of Toxcatl was practiced in other Aztec cities; nevertheless, the very same lack of evidence prevents modern scholars from completely excluding this possibility. It is therefore possible that other Aztec towns and cities also introduced this element to the festival, provided that they had chosen a divine impersonator of Tezcatlipoca (or Tezcatlipoca's priest) who could signal the beginning of penance with notes from his flute. This concept is purely speculative.

9.0. Toxcatl in relation to other *veintenas* in Tenochtitlan

The *Florentine Codex* offers numerous detailed descriptions of all the monthly festivals of the *xiuhpohualli* calendar. It is generally agreed that the festival celebrations described by Bernardino de Sahagún's informants took place in Tenochtitlan during the reign of Moctezuma II Xocoyotzin (1502–1520); this theory is further supported by the fact that the *Florentine Codex* frequently refers to the *huey tlatoani* as “Moctezuma” and uses both terms interchangeably. According to Sahagún, each *veintena* had been dedicated to a special theme or an agricultural event; each festival honored a specific deity or a group of deities (see Table 1). Huitzilopochtli and Tezcatlipoca had been venerated on several occasions: the Toxcatl and Panquetzalitzli festivals had been dedicated to them both. All Aztec deities had been venerated

³⁹¹ Durán 1971: 101.

during the Teotleco festival and Tezcatlipoca-Titlacauan had been specifically mentioned as the first god to arrive at the celebration grounds.³⁹²

The festivals of Toxcatl and Panquetzaliztli bore many similarities: both of them were dedicated to Tezcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli, although the former focused predominantly on Tezcatlipoca and his connection to the *huey tlatoani*, whereas the latter was considered the major feast of Huitzilopochtli. Panquetzaliztli presented Huitzilopochtli as a god of war and patron of warriors: during the month young men took part in several competitions and presented their fighting skills. Seasoned warriors were paid special attention and war captives were sacrificed for Huitzilopochtli. Tenochtitlan honored the former tribal deity of the Mexica with songs and elaborate dances. A dough image of Huitzilopochtli had been prepared and carried around the city the similar fashion it had been used during Toxcatl.³⁹³

Panquetzaliztli may have celebrated the Mexica-Tenochca past and present alongside their tribal god; it highlighted their long journey from the legendary homeland of Aztlán and their achievements, which culminated in the splendor and glory of Tenochtitlan. War was once again put in the center of attention: it was the tenacity and the bravery of the Mexica that helped them establish themselves as the leading political power in the Valley of Mexico. The people of Tenochtitlan believed that Huitzilopochtli led them to their victories and that the god envisioned the city as the center of the known world.

³⁹² Sahagún 1950-1982: II: 21, 127.

³⁹³ Ibid., p. 141-144.

Another festival which celebrated the past of the Mexica-Tenochca was called Quecholli. This feast, dedicated to the hunter god Mixcoatl, included a ritual deer hunt and a sacrifice of slaves in a manner which was supposed to resemble hunting as well.³⁹⁴ The *veintena* reminded the Mexica-Tenochca of their Chichimec ancestors – wandering hunters-gatherers that arrived in the Valley of Mexico after the decline of Tollan and which in time established permanent settlements.³⁹⁵ The ritual hunt was intended to remind the Mexica-Tenochca of their humble origins and the hardship they overcame on their path to glory.

The deities that had been venerated during Toxcatl according to other primary sources had also been honored in Tenochtitlan. Yacatecuhtli was provided with human sacrifice during the month of Tititl; the sacrifice coincided with the inauguration rites for the new merchant guild members. Slaves were ritually washed and “purified” as a preparation for the offering. Merchants also held private celebrations in their homes.³⁹⁶ Atlahua and Cihuacoatl had been honored during Teotleco together with other Aztec deities.

Toxcatl remained the only *veintena* festival which included the sacrifice of an *ixiptla* impersonating the deity for such an extended period of time. Another feature which distinguished Toxcatl in Tenochtitlan was its focus on the ruler and his prerogatives; the festival investigated the source of his power

³⁹⁴ Mixcoatl was the patron deity of the Otomi peoples and the Chichimecs. He was appropriated by the Aztecs and became predominantly the deity of hunt and hunters. He was also venerated in Tlaxcala in Huexotzinco, the city-states which fought flowery wars with Tenochtitlan; in those cities Mixcoatl was known as Camaxtli.

³⁹⁵ Sahagūn 1950-1982: II: 134-140.

³⁹⁶ Aguilar-Moreno 2006: 297.

and his connection to the sphere of the divine. Toxcatl combined the themes which emerged during other festivals such as the legacy of the Mexica-Tenochca and their mythical origin – the ties to the Toltecs and the Chichimecs; the journey and the obstacles which they had to overcome (e.g.: the treachery of the evil sorcerer Copil or the persecutions and banishment that the Mexica suffered from the hands of their neighbors, according to their legends). Finally, the festival honored two deities considered to be the most important members of the Aztec pantheon – Huitzilopochtli and Tezcatlipoca.

10.0. Conclusions

The festival of Toxcatl in Tenochtitlan during the reign of Moctezuma II (1502–1520) was a multifaceted ceremony. It addressed themes which were considered crucial by the state and it included rituals that referred to the Tenochca past, present and future. The festival honored two deities tightly connected to the Aztec history, legacy, and expansionist politics – Tezcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli – and related to numerous aspects of Aztec life and society.

The city of Tenochtitlan had been put in the center of the ritual, although it was not identified as the *axis mundi*. Its political, economic and military presence dominated the Valley of Mexico for almost a hundred years and lasted until the Spanish conquest. Tenochtitlan exerted enormous influence on the entire region through military and tributary subjugation; it was a powerful hub of trade exchange and the predominant distribution center of the Aztec Empire. The never-ending sequence of religious festivals initiated a

constant demand for supply of luxury goods for costumes and ornaments used during ceremonies. Such precious materials were imported from the farthest corners of the empire.

The flamboyance and ostentatious opulence of these ceremonies served as a demonstration of power and wealth of Tenochtitlan and was designed to overwhelm the spectators. Scenarios of feasts had been meticulously planned in advance by a group of trained professionals and left no room for improvisation; every single detail had been scheduled and repeatedly rehearsed in order to give the flawless performance. The sequence of the ritual activities remained unchanged; repetition was the key to perfection. The dancers and singers had been preparing for this ceremony for weeks, practicing steps and arrangements in ideal symmetry.

The opulence of the festivals reflected on the wealth and the strong position of Tenochtitlan and demonstrated the ability to afford luxurious goods – especially in the context of Mexica-Tenochca austere past. Themes from the mythical journey from Aztlan to Tenochtitlan were present during Toxcatl – the *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca-Titlacauan visited numerous places connected to the myth of pilgrimage and the foundation of Tenochtitlan. The rituals conducted in the tribal district related to the Toltec and Chichimec legacy. The sacrificial site in Tlacoachcalco was included in the scenario after a prolonged period of hostilities between Tenochtitlan and Chalco, and it most probably referred to the Toltec influence and legacy in the region as well as to the territorial expansion of the Aztec Empire.

Seen from this perspective, Toxcatl in Tenochtitlan was a dynamic, changing narration on Mexica-Tenochca history: an artificial construct which aimed to strengthen their position and their claim to power and dominance in the region. Elements of their constructed identity and history were incorporated to the rituals and ceremonies, constantly reminding the people of their long journey from poverty to greatness. Tenochtitlan identified itself as a logical successor and heir to other political powers from the past – the cultures of Teotihuacan and the Toltecs. The swift rise to power was presented as a logical consequence of the divine will; Huitzilopochtli led his people from Aztlan to the banks of Lake Texcoco and accompanied them during numerous hardships because he wanted them to achieve greatness. In this vision of history the victories and prosperity of Mexica-Tenochca were awarded to them by their tribal god, who in turn had been elevated to the status of a solar deity. Huitzilopochtli was also a warrior god and some of the myths in which he takes prominent part were stories of violent takeovers and upheavals; this fact justified Mexica-Tenochca ferociousness and aggressive territorial expansion, since their beloved deity was himself a conqueror and victor.

Toxcatl in Tenochtitlan put the divine office of the *huey tlatoani* in the center of attention. The Aztecs had already been well familiar with the function of a “speaker for the god” since according to their legends Huitzilopochtli had directed the Mexica in their journey from Aztlan, and expressed his wishes and commands through a designated “priest/speaker”. In order to complete the cultural transition from barbaric Chichimecs to polished Tenochca, chief ideologists such as Tlacaelel could have restructured the ceremonies and

initiated new customs. It is possible that around that time Huitzilopochtli's status had been elevated and the cult of Tezcatlipoca as a "ruler's god" had been introduced. Tezcatlipoca linked the ambitious Mexica-Tenochca even further to the Toltec cultural heritage and helped them achieve the level of refinement that was appropriate for their political aspirations. Although Huitzilopochtli retained his position as the patron god of Tenochtitlan, Tezcatlipoca was now the patron of the highest political power and therefore from that moment on *tlatoani's* commands were considered to be direct expressions of Tezcatlipoca's will. To sanctify this transition, the office of the highest political, economic, and military ruler underwent a significant transformation and became divine in its nature.

The ruler participated in the Toxcatl festival in Tenochtitlan; he appeared during the tribal district rituals, decorated the *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca-Titlacauan, and finally went into seclusion during the final days of the *veintena*. The constant presence of the divine impersonator in the city reminded the people of the mystic bond between the *tlatoani* and Tezcatlipoca – the music of his flute referred to the god's omniscience and omnipresence, personified by both the *ixiptla* and the *tlatoani* in the city of Tenochtitlan. Even though the ruler was not as involved in the events of Toxcatl as the *ixiptla*, his importance for the ceremony should not be underestimated; both figures were intimately connected to Tezcatlipoca. The living image of god incorporated a piece of his essence, while the ruler was able to contact with the sphere of sacrum on regular basis and served as a spokesman of the god.

The *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca-Titlacauan could have signaled to the common people as well as the nobility that their god was watching them closely and knew every intimate secret hidden in their hearts. The transgressions and injustice would not go unpunished unless an adequate amount of penance and self-reflection were provided by the guilty party. Toxcatl could have provided people with the opportunity to examine their conscience and correct their mistakes; if they showed remorse (frequently expressed by self-mutilation), Tezcatlipoca would help them keep their crimes undiscovered. However, those who remained unrepentant could face divine wrath and severe consequences.

The living image of Tezcatlipoca-Titlacauan was an embodiment of qualities appreciated by the Aztecs and associated with young men. He was well educated in the art of dance and song, he was a proficient flute player, and he acted in a dignified, elegant fashion. This paragon of youthful beauty and eloquence could have reminded young Aztec men of the advantages of pursuing military career, which in case of commoners was the only way to achieve higher social status and material privileges that came with it. The transformations of the *ixiptla* presented a perfect career path of a young warrior: the success that followed capturing four live prisoners and the change in attire which was visible to everybody, marking his maturity and prowess.

The young men who established themselves on the battlefield were able to choose a suitable life partner and involve in sexual relations without previous limitations. It is therefore possible that the *ixiptla*'s performance

during Toxcatl helped inspire young Aztec men to display courage on the battlefield: in case of their success they would be awarded honors and riches, whereas their capture and imprisonment would give them the possibility of the “glorious warrior death” on the sacrificial stone. Both cases had been presented as somewhat attractive prospects that awaited only the bravest and most masculine of men.

Toxcatl may have helped endorse the warrior lifestyle through the performance of the *ixiptla* of Tezcatlipoca-Titlacauan, who presented an idealized model of male conduct in the Aztec society: from a young man who impersonated the concept of adolescent physical perfection and cultural refinement, to a warrior gaining his first insignia and celebrating his success in the battle, to a mature man enjoying the luxurious lifestyle of a seasoned warrior, to a sacrificial victim dying on the altar in order to provide the gods with nutritious essence and to join the Sun on his daily journey through the sky. A warrior’s death provided a place in this heavenly entourage; death from old age or disease sentenced even the most experienced and decorated warriors to the afterlife of mediocrity.

In Tenochtitlan military success was translated to spoils of war, expanding the territory that could be submitted to the tributary system and increasing the wealth and prosperity of its ruling class. Toxcatl reflected on this relation between war and wealth, not only through the example of an ideal warrior life, but also through lavish display of riches, costumes, costly ornaments and elaborate dance performances. The entire spectacle had been planned and orchestrated to remind the gathered audience and invited foreign guest

of the power behind the *huey tlatoani* - Tenochtitlan's fate and privilege granted to the city and its inhabitants by the gods themselves and manifested in its glorious destiny as the most powerful city in the known world.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of Toxcatl descriptions in the primary sources, to which the two previous chapters had been contributed, resulted in several conclusions which are going to be summed up in the following chapter.

1.0. The *xiuhpohualli* calendar in the Aztec Empire

The descriptions of Toxcatl based on the interviews with the inhabitants of the *chinampa* area, Tepepulco and Tenochtitlan clearly indicate several important facts concerning the Aztec calendric system and regional variations in its celebrations:

1. The Toxcatl festival had been celebrated as a part of a determined and permanent sequence of months which constituted the solar calendar *xiuhpohualli*. That calendar had been in wide use on the territory conquered and governed by the Aztec Triple Alliance. Although the sequence of months had been generally accepted by and remained unchanged in various cities, towns, and other administrative units within the Aztec Empire, there are reasons to believe that their calendars had not been synchronized, i.e.: they had not introduced a universal starting point. As a consequence of such discrepancy the territories subjugated and governed by the Aztecs celebrated the beginning of their year count in different months and on different days. However, this fact had not

influenced the sequence of the months itself. It is believed that the Aztecs introduced their year count and the sequence of months on all the territories they had conquered; the descriptions of the Toxcatl festival in the *chinampa* area and Tepepulco prove that the Aztecs left room for improvisation, allowing changes in organization and execution of the monthly feasts.

2. Based on the assumption that the Aztecs did not include intercalations in their astronomic calculations, it is possible that the sequence of the months (and therefore also the festivals celebrated during each month of the *xiuhpohualli* calendar) shifted considerably from its “original” position (which would be understood as the initial day and year of the Mesoamerican calendar count, ca. 680-683 CE). The following shift would have resulted in the separation of the festivals from the astronomic and agrarian events which they used to celebrate. Therefore the feast of Toxcatl, believed originally to be the celebration of the changing seasons (the end of the harvest period and the beginning of the dry season), had not corresponded with the appropriate moment in the astronomical calendar anymore.

This theory, created by Michel Graulich, seems highly plausible, since it explains the discrepancy between the interpretation of the significance of *veintenas* (which follow the agrarian cycle) and their actual positioning in the *xiuhpohualli* calendar. Toxcatl described by the 16th-century scholars had been celebrated in April and May (according to various time counts provided by Bernardino de Sahagún and Diego Durán). This time of the year actually coincides with the beginning of the rainy season in the

Valley of Mexico; therefore the majority of modern interpretations of the feast (those which suggest that Toxcatl designated the beginning of the dry season) seem to be proven invalid. The shift of *veintenas* caused by the lack of intercalations would explain this issue.

3. Due to the fact that the Triple Alliance focused their attention on the military and economic aspects of their territorial expansion, the subjugated regions were generally allowed to keep their local customs and beliefs; exceptions were made for those who actively opposed the Aztec invasion instead of surrendering immediately. The territories which enjoyed religious liberty were expected to introduce the cult of Huitzilopochtli as well as the Aztec calendar count to their customs; such leniency on the conquerors' part resulted in a high level of religious syncretism in the subjugated areas. Aztec subjects were able to incorporate their own rituals and actors to the Aztec calendar, which was clearly visible during Toxcatl in Tepepulco and the Xochimilco (*chinampa*) area.
4. In addition to the various dates of the Toxcatl festival mentioned in the primary sources, there were several mentions of the name variations as well. Alfonso Caso noted some of them: in Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, Tepepulco, Tecciztlan, Huichapan, and Tlaxcala the *veintena* was called Toxcatl; in Teotitlan it was known as Tepopochtli; in Metitlan it was called Popochtli.³⁹⁷ Toxcatl portrayed in the *Codex Borbonicus* was reportedly known under an alternative name – Tepopochhuiliztli – “incensing”. The term referred to one of the most important activity performed during the

³⁹⁷ Caso 1958, Appendix, table II.

ceremony in the Chinampaneca area (mentioned on several occasions during the descriptions of the Tenochtitlan festivities in the *Florentine Codex* as well), that is, to incense burning, which served as a method of spiritual purification of people, animals and objects. Moreover, copal incense was offered to deities as symbolic nutrition, since the Aztecs considered copal – “the blood of trees” – a divine equivalent of maize, the food for humans.

2.0. Regional differences in the descriptions of Toxcatl – local variations and their causes

The places described in the primary sources (Tepepulco and the Xochimilco area) evidently enjoyed many religious liberties and therefore were able to introduce “local” elements to the Aztec feast. They added local deities and patron gods (Yacatecuhtli, Cihuacoatl, and Atlahua) to the scenario of the festival and “customized” the Aztec celebration.

The act of “customizing” Toxcatl in the areas remaining under the Aztec sphere of influence resulted in the introduction of themes which were considered distinctive of the local social conditions, to the local economy of a given region. The choice of the elements which were added to the “original scenario” of the festival (connected to the cycle of harvest and drought, and originating in ancient agrarian celebrations) indicated the themes and figures that had been considered important to the identity of a particular group of people.

Some of the deities introduced to the festival by the aforementioned groups, as well as the people of Tenochtitlan, indicated their mythical origin and the

ties to the Toltec culture. The Toltecs were widely considered to have achieved the highest level of cultural sophistication and refinement during their reign as the dominant group in the Valley of Mexico (ca. 800-1000 CE), and the ties to their culture served their self-proclaimed successors as a claim to political sovereignty (for example: the neo-Toltec cities such as Culhuacan, which was thought to have been established by a Toltec splinter group after the decline of the Toltec culture, and some of the Nahuatl peoples such as the Mexica).

It had become a custom for many groups which arrived in the Valley of Mexico after the decline of the Toltec culture to trace their origin to the people of Tollan (the Toltec capital, also known as Tula) and claim to be the heirs to their political legacy. A similar claim could be observed in the descriptions of Toxcatl in the primary sources:

1. The goddess Cihuacoatl (pictured in the Codex Borbonicus on the page illustrating Toxcatl) represented the link to the Toltec nobility and their cultural heritage in the Xochimilco area. Her cult could have been introduced in the area through the neo-Toltec splinter group which established the city of Culhuacan and exerted considerable influence on the culture and politics of the neighboring cities. The cult of Cihuacoatl was transplanted to Xochimilco from Culhuacan and was subsequently assimilated and appropriated by Tenochtitlan to further strengthen the link to the Toltec culture.

2. In Tenochtitlan the ties to the Toltec heritage had been predominantly represented by the figure of god Tezcatlipoca and his avatar Titlacauan; both deities were present in the Toltec myths and legends.
3. In addition to the Toltec references in Toxcatl, the chief ideologists of Tenochtitlan included another allusion to their past and mythical origins in the festival through the figure of Huitzilopochtli - the tribal god of the Mexica people who ordered them to leave the legendary ancestral homeland of Aztlan, and who led them to the shores of Lake Texcoco, where he commanded them to raise the city of Tenochtitlan. Huitzilopochtli and his avatar Tlacauepan-Ixteucale related the Mexica-Tenochca to their “primitive” Chichimec past; in the Mexica value system and philosophy the cross-reference to the semi-nomadic Chichimec tribes and warriors, which populated the Valley of Mexico after the decline of the Toltec culture, represented the humble beginnings of the Mexica people and stood in vivid contrast to the high position they managed to achieve as founding member of the Triple Alliance. Therefore the Mexica-Tenochca appropriated two different groups as their ideological and legendary ancestors – the Toltecs and the Chichimecs – although only their nobility could claim blood relation to the former and the actual connection to the latter remains subject of academic debate.³⁹⁸
4. The Mexica-Tenochca claimed that their noble houses were direct descendants of the Toltec ruling families; they incorporated Toltec deities to their pantheon and included them in the Toxcatl festival, which celebrated the ruler and which reminded the people of his connection to

³⁹⁸ For a comprehensive analysis of the origin of indigenous peoples of the Valley of Mexico and the ongoing debate see: Navarrete Linares 2011.

the sphere of sacrum. In the early phase of the Tenochtitlan history the Mexica leaders and their families intermarried with the ruling house of the neo-Toltec city of Culhuacan and therefore their descendants could claim Toltec bloodline. The Toltec nobility claimed to have descended from the god Quetzalcoatl; by intermarrying with the nobles of Culhuacan the Mexica aristocracy provided their bloodline with a divine antecedent.

In two cases (namely the *Primeros Memoriales* and the *Codex Borbonicus*) the descriptions of the Toxcatl festival in the primary sources mentioned several deities which had not been included in the feast scenario in Tenochtitlan – Cihuacoatl, Atlahua, and Yacatecuhtli. This could further indicate that these figures were of special interest to the population of respectively the Xochimilco (particularly the Chinampaneca area) and Tepepulco. Their cult could have played a significant part in the religious life of the aforementioned communities and the deities could have represented the most characteristic feature of the local economy:

1. Cihuacoatl (“Snake Woman”) was an earth goddess of motherhood and fertility and the patron goddess of the island of Cuitlahuac and the adjacent areas, including Xochimilco, Colhuacan and Chalco. She was also known under the names of: Quilaztli (“Plant Creator”), Tonantzin (“Our Mother”), Cuauhcihuatl (“Eagle Woman”), and Yaocihuatl (“Warrior Woman”). Her cult was believed to have originated in Tollan (Tula) and introduced in the lake area by the neo-Toltec city of Culhuacan. Cihuacoatl was the earth and fertility goddess influencing the growth of vegetation; her connection to the agriculture and the

cycle of nature indicated the key role which farming played in the economy of the Chinampaneca area. Xochimilco and the adjacent areas were one of the biggest food producers in the Valley of Mexico; due to the fact that Cihuacoatl was believed to be responsible for the abundance of nutrition, her “participation” in the Toxcatl celebration in Xochimilco (illustrated in the *Codex Borbonicus*) further proves that the festival was meant to showcase the themes which were considered important to the community and which reflected on its characteristic features.

2. Atlahua (“The Lord of the Water Edge”) was a deity of water, lakes, fishery and hunting. He was portrayed alongside Cihuacoatl, Tezcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli in the *Codex Borbonicus*. His presence in the source indicates that the cult of Atlahua was considered important for the inhabitants of the Chinampaneca area, a region which economy was entirely dependent of the nearby lake system. The fluctuations in the water level determined the quality and quantity of the harvest; based on the fact that the Valley of Mexico witnessed many natural catastrophes and subsequent food shortages caused by them, it is only logical that the deity of the lake, fishery, and hunting had been revered to such an extent that it had been included alongside Cihuacoatl in the Toxcatl festivities.
3. Yacatecuhtli, the patron gods of merchants venerated in Tepepulco, represented the crucial branch of the local economy: trade. According to the archeological evidence, Tepepulco had been a renowned center of obsidian production and its export since the Classic Period of the

Mesoamerican history (ca. 200-1000 CE); additionally, it was located on one of the most popular trade routes connecting the biggest economic, political and religious center in the region in that period of time -Teotihuacan - with the cities of the Gulf Coast.

Obsidian trade provided the principal source of income for the community; it is not surprising that the deity that was believed to be partially responsible for the well-being of Tepepulco had been included in the Toxcatl festival (according to the information provided by the *Primeros Memoriales*) and that it was sided with Tezcatlipoca and Huitzilopochtli. Once again, the additional actor in the festival represented the feature that best characterized the given community.

3.0. The significance of Toxcatl

The descriptions of the Toxcatl festival in the 16th- and 17th -century sources portray a multifaceted feast that had not been celebrated in a standardized manner in the Aztec Empire. The explanation for such a discrepancy could lie in the fact that the inhabitants of the territories conquered by the Aztecs had most probably not been forced to reject their local beliefs and customs; on the contrary, they were able to integrate them into the Aztec religious system. As a result, the scenario of the calendar feasts of the Aztec solar calendar *xihpohualli* had been expanded to include local patron deities and customs.

The places described in the *Primeros Memoriales* and the *Codex Borbonicus* were considerably smaller than Tenochtitlan and they possessed an entirely

different economic structure. Whereas Tenochtitlan had been the center of the tributary system and profited from the constant supply of goods from every corner of the empire, the economy of the places like Tepepulco and the *chinampa* area had been focused on agricultural and resource production; they contributed to the tributary system more than they profited from it. Tepepulco was an obsidian production center; the *chinampas* provided the local populace with various types of nutrition (agriculture, fishery, and hunting). These economic differences had been directly reflected in the Toxcatl celebrations.

The variations in celebration could have reflected on the diversities in the local economy and on the complex ethnic structure of the Aztec Empire. Each population described in the aforementioned primary sources possessed a distinct ethnic structure, origin, and tradition. These particular communities boasted their multifaceted cultural heritages and they could have used Toxcatl as a carrier of their manifesto; they could have transformed the Aztec festival to project their own cultural agenda and to showcase the features which they themselves considered distinctive of the identity of a given community.

The high level of religious syncretism noticeable in the descriptions of Toxcatl indicates that the communities (or their chief ideologists) participated actively in the construction of the ritual scenario in order to display the desirable features. As a result, the Toxcatl celebrations in Tepepulco and the *chinampa* area clearly demonstrated which branch of the economy had been essential to the well-being of the local population;

Tepepulco thrived due to the obsidian production and the trade exchange, whereas the *chinampas* celebrated vegetation fertility, fishery, and hunting. The deities that were held responsible for the given domains had also been included in the festivities.

The Toxcatl celebrations in Tenochtitlan varied significantly from those described as taking place in Tepepulco and the *chinampa* area. Due to the size and significance of Tenochtitlan its festivals were much more elaborate and spectacular, not to mention that they had been described more detailed and more often by the 16th- and 17th-century observers. Tenochtitlan had been the residence of the *de facto* ruler of the Aztec Triple Alliance – the *huey tlatoani* – and it had been the place where all the important political decisions were made. It was also the hub of the vast tribute system and its biggest recipient.

The unique position of Tenochtitlan in the Aztec Empire had also been reflected in the Toxcatl celebrations. The aspects that were considered important and significant enough to showcase this uniqueness and to be featured in the Toxcatl ceremony are clearly visible in the writings of Bernardino de Sahagún and Diego Durán. The ruler and his relationship with the god Tezcatlipoca, as well as the position of a warrior in the Aztec society, had been put in the center of attention during the festival. Both aspects indicated the features that distinguished Tenochtitlan among other Aztec cities:

1. Tenochtitlan had been the residence of the supreme ruler of the Aztec Empire.

2. The supreme ruler was believed to be the representative of Tezcatlipoca on earth; he commanded in the name of Tezcatlipoca and served as the spokesman for the god on the mortal plane. Therefore all his wishes and orders were considered the expression of the divine will.
3. Due to the divine nature of the *tlatoni* office the state of Tenochtitlan identified herself as the logical successor of the Toltec political tradition; its inhabitants considered themselves predestined to conquer other territories as part of the “divine plan”.
4. Warriors enjoyed special privileges and honors in Tenochtitlan because the state profited from numerous military campaigns and the subsequent territorial conquests. Bravery in battle was promoted and awarded; young men were encouraged to pursue military career. However, they faced long-term negative consequences in case they failed to meet the social expectations.
5. War and territorial expansion were a high priority in Tenochtitlan. They were supported by the state ideology; the Mexica history had been rewritten in order to justify their constant pursue of war. The warrior gods – Huitzilopochtli and Tezcatlipoca – had been elevated to a special status.

Whereas Tepepulco presented itself as a trade center and the Chinampaneca area identified with agricultural production, Tenochtitlan defined herself as the seat of the supreme ruler and the state powered by war and conquest. The Mexica-Tenochca nobility claimed to descend from the Toltec lineage, therefore justifying their expansionist ambitions – as the successors of the

“warlike” Toltecs they felt entitled to conquer neighboring lands and subjugate them to the tribute system from which they profited the most.

Considering the recipients of such elaborated message, it is clear that the Toxcatl festival had been addressed to both the local inhabitants as well as to the foreign spectators. The members of a particular community reinforced their sense of identity and their heritage by honoring their patron gods and celebrating those aspects of the local economy (or political features) which rendered them unique in their own opinion. They strengthened their sense of affiliation by participating in the rituals which were designed to engage units: quail offerings followed by private family feasts, dancing and singing, confession and penance or incense burning. Toxcatl presented the unit with numerous possibilities of engagement and active participation, which made the festival unique compared to the other *veintenas* of the *xiuhpohualli* festival.

Members of the local population were not the only viewers participating in the Toxcatl festival. The ideologists of Tenochtitlan prepared the lavish feasts and spectacular ceremonies not only to satisfy their own appetite for drama, but also to shock, awe, and intimidate the invited guests. The *xiuhpohualli* calendar festivals certainly had been witnessed by the merchants, who later came back to their respective home-cities and reported what they saw in vivid details. Other more prominent guests had been invited by the *huey tlatoani* himself and usually included rulers of the enemy provinces or members of the ruling houses of the conquered territories. The invitation had been a conscious maneuver: the guests were expected to be intimidated by

the sheer volume and opulence of the spectacle and consequently to report back on the greatness and power of Tenochtitlan.

In conclusion, Sahagún's statement on the significance of Toxcatl is strongly substantiated due to the nature of the festival: it was designed to highlight the defining aspects of the local economy, politics, and social life – a feature which none of the other seventeen festivals of the *xiuhpohualli* calendar included. Toxcatl presented the quintessence of the given community; it included and honored deities which were considered especially important to the inhabitants of that particular place. The festival presented them with the opportunity to manifest its ethnic makeup, tradition, and origin; it provided a medium for the display of uniqueness and identity in the multicultural, multiethnic, and multilingual Aztec Empire.

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SUMMARY

The following dissertation investigates the sociopolitical significance of the Toxcatl festival, a religious ceremony included in the Aztec solar calendar *xiuhpohualli*.

The descriptions of the Toxcatl in the 16th- and 17th –century sources, written by Spanish missionaries and friars who lived and worked in Mexico, portrayed a multifaceted feast that had not been celebrated in a standardized manner in the Aztec Empire. Each source included a different set of actors, ritual elements, and a considerably altered scenario. These discrepancies reflected on the specific socioeconomic conditions of the places mentioned in the Toxcatl descriptions and gave important clues to their ethnic composition, the type of the local economy, and even to the mythical origin of their inhabitants.

Such syncretism was caused by the fact that the Aztecs had not integrated all the conquered territories on the religious and cultural level, but rather focused on the political subjugation and incorporation of the new areas into their tribute system during the phase of rapid territorial expansion between the 15th and the 16th century. The Aztec conquerors introduced several elements of their cult and customs to the newly-acquired lands, although they allowed the local populace to maintain their beliefs and traditions in most of the cases. One of the newly-introduced concepts was the annual sequence of religious festivals – the *xiuhpohualli*. The inhabitants of the

subjugated territories used the festival of Toxcatl to manifest their identity and heritage in the multicultural Aztec Empire through the adaptation of their local patron gods into the main “scenario” of the festival.

In the greatest Aztec city – Tenochtitlan – Toxcatl served as a platform for broadcasting political aspirations of the Mexica-Tenochca Aztecs; the festival glorified their humble beginnings as a wandering tribe and reinforced their connection to the patron gods – Huitzilopochtli and Tezcatlipoca. The ceremony reflected on their vision of the Aztec history and showcased the relationship between the supreme ruler of the Aztec Empire – the *huey tlatoani* – and the old Mesoamerican deity Tezcatlipoca. Finally, Toxcatl in Tenochtitlan honored the warrior caste and presented the Aztec youth with a paragon of masculinity - a young male slave impersonating one of the avatars of Tezcatlipoca – Titlacauan – and destined to be sacrificed in the culminating point of the festival.

KURZFASSUNG

Die folgende Dissertation erforscht die soziopolitische Bedeutung von Toxcatl – eine der wichtigen religiösen Zeremonien im aztekischen Sonnenkalender *xiuhpohualli*.

Die Darstellungen von Toxcatl in den Quellen aus dem 16. und 17. Jahrhundert, verfasst von spanischen Missionaren und Mönchen, welche in Mexico lebten und arbeiteten, beschreiben ein vielfältiges Fest, das nicht auf eine einheitliche Art und Weise im Aztekischen Imperium zelebriert wurde. Jede Quelle erwähnt unterschiedliche Akteure sowie unterschiedliche rituelle Elemente. Weiter folgen die beschriebenen Feierlichkeiten jeweils beträchtlich veränderten Drehbüchern. Diese Unterschiede reflektierten die spezifischen sozioökonomischen Bedingungen der Orte, welche in den Darstellungen von Toxcatl genannt werden. Sie geben wichtige Hinweise zu ihrer ethnischen Komposition, zur Spezifik der lokalen Wirtschaft und sogar zum mythischen Ursprung ihrer Einwohner.

Solch ein Sinkretismus stammt aus der Zeit der aztekischen Eroberungskriege mit ihren Nachbarn zwischen dem 15. und 16. Jahrhundert; die Azteken fokussierten sich auf die politische Unterwerfung ihrer Gegner sowie der Expansion des Tributsystems, anstelle der religiösen und kulturellen Integration der besiegten Völker. Die aztekischen Eroberer setzten etliche Kultelemente und Bräuche in den eroberten Territorien ein, trotzdem ließen sie in den meisten Fällen den Einheimischen die Freiheit, an ihrem Glauben und den Traditionen festzuhalten. Eines der neuen Konzepte, welches die Azteken einführten, war die Sequenz von religiösen Festivals –

xiuhpohualli. Die Einheimischen nutzten Toxcatl, um ihre Identität und ihr Erbe innerhalb des multikulturellen Aztekischen Imperiums zu manifestieren, und setzten ihre Hausgötter in das Hauptszenario des Festivals ein.

In der größten aztekischen Stadt – Tenochtitlan – diente Toxcatl als Plattform für die politischen Aspirationen der Tenochca-Mexica Azteken. Das Festival glorifizierte ihre demütige Vergangenheit als Wandervolk und unterstrich die Verbindung zu ihren Patron-Göttern – Huitzilopochtli und Tezcatlipoca. Die Zeremonie spiegelte ihre subjektive Vision der aztekischen Geschichte wider und stellte eine Beziehung zwischen dem obersten Herrscher des Aztekisches Imperiums – *huey tlatoani* – und dem alten mezoamerikanischen Gott Tezcatlipoca dar. Schließlich ehrte Toxcatl in Tenochtitlan die Krieger und bot ein Maskulinitätsideal für junge aztekische Männer an. Dieses Ideal wurde durch einen jungen Sklaven verkörpert - einen Avatar von Tezcatlipoca. Dieser, Titlacauan genannt, wurde am Kulminationspunkt des Festivals rituell geopfert.