

The Fate of the Soul in Modern Aztec Religious Thought

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Introduction

In this report I would like to describe an incident that occurred during my anthropological fieldwork among the Nahuatl Indians of the Huasteca region of northern Veracruz, Mexico. The incident is a tragic one—the funeral of a young girl, age twelve, who died one day by drowning during an outing with her playmates. The girl was my goddaughter; and because of this, I was asked to sponsor her funeral ritual. The incident was obviously a sorrowful occasion, but it was also a rare and unique experience that provided me with a glimpse of the complexity of Nahuatl cosmological and eschatological beliefs.

Sir Edward B. Tylor has written that the essence of any religion is the belief in souls (6). In fact, according to Tylor, the heart of religion *per se* is the concept of the soul. That is, if we define religion as the concern with the supernatural, spiritual or sacred, then ideas concerning the nature of the soul are the core of any belief system we label as religion. Therefore, the best way to understand another religious system is to first understand its assumptions concerning the nature and fate of the soul.

Background and Cosmology

The Huasteca region of northern Veracruz is a hilly, physically remote tropical jungle region that lies in eastern Mexico between the Tropic of Cancer and the 20th parallel. The area is inhabited by four linguistically distinct Indian groups: the Huastecs, the Tepehuas, the Otomi, and the Nahuatl. By far the most numerous of all these groups are the Nahuatl, the contemporary descendants of the ancient Aztecs who settled in this region in the sixteenth century.

Like their neighbors, the modern Aztecs are of basically self-sufficient subsistence, slash and burn horticulturalists, and can be characterized generally as falling near the folk end of the folk-urban continuum. That is, they are an unacculturated group living in a remote area, following a way of life that allows them to maintain a high degree of cultural identity as Indians. Their farming equipment consists primarily of the simple digging stick and the machete. Maize is the principal crop which is supplemented by black beans, squash, tomatoes, chile peppers and various tropical fruits and vegetables. Animal husbandry is basically limited to pigs, turkeys and chickens.

The residential pattern among the modern Aztec is virilocal. That is, although each nuclear family has its own dwelling which is built by the male just before marriage, the new home is located close to the home of the male's father. However, the new dwelling is seen as a separate entity and is built usually at a small distance from the home of the male's natal family and connected to it by a trail. Thus, the net result of this settlement pattern is a loose grouping of huts clustered in one particular area but with each having its own sphere of existence separate from that of others. The village then is like a series of dispersed clusters of huts or compounds occupied by related males and their families, and connected to each other by a labyrinth of jungle trails.

The cosmology of the modern Aztec is even more complex than their cultural geography. For the modern Aztec, like many other peoples, the universe is divided into several realms, each inhabited by different spiritual beings. However, these are not exclusive and mobility is possible between the realms, a typical situation in many of the world's cosmologies. For example, in Greek mythology Zeus, the king of the gods, lived on Mt. Olympus, his brother Poseidon lived at the bottom of the ocean, while another brother, Pluto, lived under the earth. Nonetheless, visitations, invasions or movement between all of these worlds were possible, even probable. So too for the modern Aztec. The first realm of the cosmos is *Ilwihkaktli*, the arc of the Heavens. Similar to Greek cosmology this realm is home to the most important of the supernaturals that inhabit the Aztec universe. Here lives *Tonantsi*, mother of all life and controller of all fertility and reproduction. She is associated with a sacred "court" that consists of many vague entities syncretized with various figures drawn from the list of Roman Catholic saints. *Tonantsi* also has four sons who are felt to be arranged in importance according to age. The oldest and the most important son is *Tlakatekolotl*, the Dark Lord of the Underworld. More like Pluto than our Devil, *Tlakatekolotl* is an ambivalent figure who rules over *Miktlan*, a kingdom of ghosts, shades, and spirit-helpers called *mecos*. The second son of *Tonantsi* is St. John the Baptist and he is married to *Apanchane*, the Lady of Water. The connubial couple control the realm of water including the rains, springs, rivers and streams. The water world, called Apan, is truly a fluid one and is felt to connect all four levels of the cosmos into an integrated whole. Rain falls from the sky, while streams, rivers and springs flow on the surface of the earth. Also, the modern Aztecs believe that springs emerge from and rivers return to the Underworld. Streams and rivers also give water back to the sky through evaporation.

Tonantsi's third son, *Moctezoma*, lives on earth in stone ruins that dot the surrounding jungle. In reality these stone ruins are ancient pre-Columbian pyramids and the accuracy of this connection, which is historically unknown to these people, is a testimony to the observation made by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss that cultures retain in their ideational systems accurate structural and historical data (1). *Moctezoma* is associated with dark powers and is felt to be related to a class of creatures known as *Ehecatl* or winds that bring illness and misfortune (4).

Tonantsi has one more son, Jesus Christ. He is the youngest son and is sometimes syncretized with the sun in the sky (3). For the Aztecs, Christ is associated with the saints of *Tonantsi's* court; sometimes he is spoken of as the "King of Saints" but by and large he is a relatively minor figure whose specific qualities are quite vague and generalized. His presence in the modern Aztec pantheon seems to represent the general process of syncretism common throughout Mexico at large. It is certain that the figure of Christ was added to the folk Aztec pantheon after the general introduction of Roman Catholicism which followed the Spanish conquest of 1521. From the historical point of view, Christ truly is the youngest or newest deity in Indian or folk cosmologies found throughout the Republic of Mexico. Once again, the Aztec view of the cosmos in a certain way actually replicates historical reality.

Death and the Soul

On September 13, 1977, Reina Hernandez, age twelve, went swimming with her little playmates. It was a typically hot September day and the band of little girls were excited about the prospect of a pleasant hour or two playing in the cool

waters of a local spring that flowed into a nearby stream. No one knows how but somehow Reina was caught in some weeds and drowned before her playmates could help her. There is no way to accurately describe the tragedy of a small girl's death. To her parents and friends she was a bundle of joy, happiness and love, and for those reasons alone her death was a terrible blow. But, for other reasons also, her death was painful. For in a few brief seconds Reina went from being a lovable child, the favorite of her family, to a dangerous, marauding and fearful spirit entity that for the safety of the family had to be driven away.

In Aztec cosmology, the souls of those who die naturally go to a spiritual underworld called *Miktlan*. *Miktlan* is much like our own world except that it is inhabited by souls who live a ghostly version of life on earth. They are shade-like creatures who lack personalities, and may even evaporate after a few years. However, people who have an unnatural death caused for example by drowning, murder, lightning, childbirth, war or any violence are felt to become highly charged, ambivalent, angry forces. Instead of going to *Miktlan* these creatures go to *Apan*, the watery realm and can therefore wander, like the water itself, through the other realms of the Cosmos. They are extremely unpredictable and dangerous due to their anger at the premature loss of their lives. Thus, Reina's death was a double tragedy to her family and her funeral came to have a special importance—it had to bury the body and at the same time drive off the potentially harmful soul. A difficult combination of emotional needs, to say the least.

The funeral was held on the day of death—a requisite of any tropical environment. The child's body was brought to the family's house and a coffin was immediately constructed on the spot by a carpenter who had been summoned for this purpose. Before the body was placed into the coffin, chalk was sprinkled in the coffin in the sign of a cross. Then a set of clean clothes that had belonged to the girl in her lifetime were laid over the chalk, along with a small pillow for her head. The body was placed over this and then covered with a shroud. Further objects were now placed into the coffin: a set of new earrings, hair combs, a needle and thread, money, as well as a plate and cup. The coffin was then filled with flowers and sealed. Incense was lit and the women of the family who had gathered at the house covered their faces and broke into a grief-stricken ritual wail that was terrible to hear. At this, the pallbearers picked up the coffin and started to carry it outside; whereupon the girl's mother placed the child's drinking glass, cup and plate on the threshold. As the pallbearers stepped over the threshold, they deliberately stepped on and smashed the utensils. As this was transpiring, the girl's grandmother strangled a white chicken and hung it over the door which was then sealed shut for good. The funeral entourage followed the casket to the cemetery and there the girl was buried. This ended the first part of the funeral ritual.

The second and most important part of Reina's funeral occurred one week after her death. Traditionally, a memorial service is held at this time to celebrate the arrival of the soul in *Miktlan*. However, in Reina's case her soul was still at large and therefore her memorial service became an extremely important event. Accordingly, it was an elaborate event which began in the afternoon of September 20, 1977, and continued until dawn of the following day. Musicians were hired to provide sacred music throughout the night. Quantities of special foods and drinks were prepared and a special altar built and decorated with leaves and flowers. On the altar were placed Reina's school books, her remaining clothes and quantities of cookies, breads and fruits. Against this altar was laid a huge cross decorated with

hibiscus flowers. In front of the altar a specially built miniature table was set up and surrounded by four posts set in the ground, each topped by a burning candle. Under this table were several incense braziers. The table was covered with a pall on top of which were placed two dresses and two hair ribbons. On top of this another more elaborate cross was laid. This was decorated with a colored paper cutting in the form of a rebozo - a typical women's shawl. It represented the dead girl. In front of this plates of prepared food were placed along with many baskets of flowers. The men sat on one side of the room, the women stood on the other side. The musicians played constantly while the women wept and wailed throughout the night-long vigil.

During the wake it is expected that some close relative delivers a eulogy about the deceased. In this case it was the girl's father. However, because of the nature of the girl's death, his eulogy took on an unusual character. Typical of the general pattern he spoke to the dead girl but, interestingly enough, he told her again and again she was dead! "You are dead, you are gone, you are no longer, you are gone, you are dead," he repeated over and over for thirty minutes, during which time the women's ritual wail reached almost hysterical levels. As the wail increased and decreased through the night, it became obvious that it did so according to some scale only part of which was sorrow, the other part owing to the needs of the ritual itself. That is, formal wailing is part of a proper funeral ritual and women seemed to be able to begin it as well as end it instantly. One minute a woman could be wailing, the next talking to someone or taking care of some necessary detail. The morning after the wake the crosses and funeral thanatophernalia are carried first to the place of death then later to the cemetery. The elaborately decorated cross, symbolizing the girl, is left at the actual place of death and told again that the girl is dead. The second cross is left at her grave in the cemetery and likewise reminded by speech and wail that the young girl is dead.

Aztec Eschatology

Monica Wilson has written that,

Rituals reveal values at their deepest level . . . men express in ritual what moves them most, and since the form of expression is conventionalized and obligatory, it is the values of the group that are revealed . . . the study of rituals [is] the key to an understanding of the essential constitution of human societies (7).

To this I would add that analysis of ritual behavior also provides insight into complex and abstract ideas found in a people's cosmology. For example, the study of the funeral ritual for Reina Hernandez reveals some essential elements in the eschatology of the modern Aztec. First and foremost the nature of the afterlife itself is construed as being not immediately or personally relevant to the lives of human beings. The afterlife is primarily a place for supernaturals and not a place for individual human continuation. The human connection to the afterlife is, at best, minimal or imprecisely conceived. In fact, there seems to be no indication that the human soul is an integral part of the spiritual world in any fundamental sense at all. In this context it is also interesting to note that for the modern Aztecs the soul is not a personalized concept as it is for, say, Christians, who assume that the soul is an invisible extension of the human personality capable of survival after the death of its corporeal frame. In the eschatological thought of the modern Aztec, the soul could be likened to the electricity that illuminates a light

bulb—a separate entity not to be confused with the light bulb itself. When the light bulb is burned out the electricity continues and even may be harmful if not handled properly. The nature of the soul for the Aztec, therefore, is not immanent, not inherent, but rather a separate independent and non-personalized force that is a necessary condition for life but not synonymous with the individuality of the human personally. In this sense, the nature of the Aztec soul could be likened to Robert Marett's concept of *mana*, an impersonal spiritual life-force associated with living and sometimes even inert things (2). Likewise, in modern Aztec religious thought, the soul is believed to be an impersonal life force, analogous, for example, to electricity and not a symbolic expression of the human personality.

As a logical extension of these beliefs, the modern Aztecs see no relationship between morality and the supernatural order at all. Therefore, the fate of the soul is not dependent, as it is, say, for Christians, upon the moral or ethical behavior of its corporeal counterpart. The problem with the fate of Reina's soul was not related to her moral conduct but rather to the unusual nature of her demise. Fear of retribution in the afterlife for immoral or unethical behavior on earth is not found among the modern Aztecs. In fact, a modern Aztec would feel the Christian missionaries' plea to be allowed to "save his soul" to be quite ghoulish and perverse. Only witches try to save, steal, or otherwise collect souls and their intentions are felt to be basically malevolent.

In summary, then, Aztec cosmology holds that the nature of the afterlife is essentially a non-human or supernatural reality that does not involve humans in any organic way. The nature of the soul reflects this belief; it is impersonal and separate from the human body and personality. It is a life-force and only accompanies the body during its days of life and is not an extension of it. Finally, the fate of the soul has no direct connection to the moral or ethical life of its human counterpart.

For the modern Aztec the world is a wonderful and fantastic but knowable reality. The Aztecs' attempt to order, understand and explain the world involves a complex and unique cosmological schema that while agreeing with all the other world's religions in assuming the existence of two worlds, one natural and the other supernatural, it contributes its own specific philosophical interpretation of these worlds and their relation to and meaning for human existence.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the actual origins and functions of modern Aztec religious thought, certain brief observations can be made that at least provide a clue to that problem. Following Durkheim, Guy Swanson, in his seminal work, *The Birth of the Gods* (5) suggests that the organization of religious systems of thought rests upon empirical sociological considerations. Religion, according to Swanson, will adapt social groups to their social and biological environments by making "the necessary seem obligatory." In his understanding "the necessary" refers to the social, technological, and ecological requirements of social groups with the implication being that different levels of socio-cultural integration need different types of supporting or compatible religious systems. While his data is primarily suggestive, his predictions for the nature of a cosmology associated with an atomistic, self-sufficient, horticultural society closely parallel the above description of modern Aztec religious beliefs. Thus, perhaps, the origins and maintenance of such beliefs represent not so much the erroneous thinking of "savages" nor even the philosophical ponderings of some brilliant Don Juan; but rather derive from and have meaning for specific

sociocultural conditions and are designed to adapt human groups to the requirements of their particular techno-environmental situation.

The essential point then is that the Aztec system of cosmological thought described above may originate in material conditions and function to adapt the modern Aztec to the realities of their world. Accordingly, then, modern Aztec cosmology may represent not so much a supernatural view of the world but rather a super-organic realization of the actual conditions of their existence. Being horticulturally self-sufficient they are likewise spiritually self-sufficient. Lacking any corporate, hierarchical social structures, they likewise do not recognize any high or omnipotent gods who concern themselves with human affairs. And lastly, the fate of the soul like the nature of the afterlife itself does not depend in any fundamental way upon human activities. Just as the fate of the individual in life is a product of his self-sufficiency, so too is the fate of the soul self-sufficient: the conditions of earthly existence are therefore projected onto the scene of the transcendental. To quote Swanson, "Our understanding of behavior suggests that all ideas arise from man's experience with his surroundings" (5). Aztec cosmology then may be said to actually replicate Aztec reality.

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