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The Aztecs and the Ideology of Male Dominance

June Nash

The origins of male dominance and its ideological support in human history is a cause for speculation and research. Some anthropologists assert the universality of male dominance and the subordination of females on the grounds that they occur in some contemporary societies that lack state organization or economic stratification.¹ The claim is underwritten with selective cross-cultural data that ignore historical research from evolutionary or culture change studies. The origin of male dominance is also attributed to the female experience of bearing and rearing children.² The opposition of nature to culture as female to male,

Some of the material in this paper was contained in a paper coauthored with Eleanor Leacock, "Ideologies of Sex: Archetypes and Stereotypes," *Annals of the New York Academy of Science* 285 (1977): 618–43. I am indebted to her and to Ruby Rohrlich-Leavitt for many comments that helped clarify the final version of this paper.

1. See, e.g., Ernestine Friedl, *Women and Men* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1975); Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" in *Woman, Culture and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1974); and Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, "Introduction," in Rosaldo and Lamphere.

2. Michelle Rosaldo and Jane M. Atkinson ("Man the Hunter and Woman: Metaphors for the Sexes in Ilongot Magical Spells," in *The Interpretation of Symbolism*, ed. Roy Willis [London: Malaby Press for the Society for Anthropological Studies, 1975]), state the reasoning behind this proposition as follows: "... it is not in giving life but in risking life that man is raised above the animal"; hence, "... superiority has been accorded in humanity not in the sex that brings forth but to that which kills." I have italicized the phrase "in humanity" since it underlines the authors' assumption that this ideology is a universal condition, not the specific and useful ideology of a predatory state.

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derived from Levi-Strauss's paradigm, is attributed to all cultures and times.³

Since many social scientists are turning to anthropologists for an answer to the question of the origin of female subordination, it is important to correct these ahistorical assumptions. With the revisions that modern ethnohistorical and ethnographic studies have brought to the work of Lewis Henry Morgan and Sir Henry Maine,⁴ we can identify historical instances of the parallel development of patriarchal authority. By a comparative analysis of such processes, we can analyze the conditions that give rise to hierarchy and the ideology that validates sexually differential access to power.

The history of the Aztecs provides an example of the transformation from a kinship-based society with a minimum of status differentiation to a class-structured empire. By tracing the changes in the aboriginal New World state, we can point to the interrelationship between male specialization in warfare, predatory conquest, a state bureaucracy based on patrilineal nobility supported by an ideology of male dominance, and the differential access to its benefits between men and women. The information is based on Bernardino de Sahagún's *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* written in the sixteenth century, Fray Diego Duran's *The Aztecs: The History of the Indies of New Spain*, Alonso de Zurita's *Breve y sumaria relación de los señores y maneras y diferencias que habia de ellos en Nueva España*, the four surviving codices of the Aztecs, and the various secondary sources cited throughout the text.⁵ In the Aztec oral and pictographic tradition, myth and history are intertwined. No attempt will be made to separate these, but, rather, to derive from both myth and fact the major themes on which Aztec society was based. In the context of these themes, I suggest, an event may have been important, although it never happened, as long as people behaved as though it had.

The constant diminution in the power of women can be seen in the

3. Rosaldo and Lamphere and Ortner in *Woman, Culture and Society* relate Lévi-Strauss's proposition of the "universal asymmetries in actual activities and cultural evaluations of men and women" to an assumed universal structural opposition between domestic and public spheres. This imposition of a Judeo-Christian principle on the rest of the world is an example of the ethnocentrism Sir Henry Maine pointed to over a century ago in his publication of *Ancient Law* (London: J. Murray, 1861). He stated that the theory that patriarchal authority was the primeval basis for the human race was simply a derivation from the scriptural history of Hebrew patriarchs.

4. See esp. the introductions by Eleanor Leacock to Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1963) and to Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (New York: International Publishers Co., 1972).

5. Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (Mexico: P. Robredo, 1938); Diego Duran, *The Aztecs: The History of the Indies of New Spain* (New York: Orion Press, 1964); Alonso de Zurita, *Breve y sumaria relación de los señores y maneras y diferencias que habia de ellos en Nueva España* (Mexico, 1941). All three authors lived and worked in the sixteenth century when they prepared the original manuscripts from which later publications were drawn.

record that emerges from these sources. The Aztecs left their homeland in Aztlan about the year A.D. 820. As they moved toward the central plateau where the high civilization of the Toltecs flourished, they established colonies where they grew the crops that provided their basic subsistence. Some 300 years later, as the vanguard arrived near Tula, the capital of the declining Toltec empire, a confrontation described in the Codex Ramirez took place between their "god" Huitzilopochtli and his sister, Malinalxoch, that reveals something of the changing structure of authority in this wandering tribe.⁶ Huitzilopochtli called his followers around him and urged them to leave Malinalxoch behind. She was a sorceress who used her supernatural power over animals to control the tribe. Huitzilopochtli is quoted as having urged his men "to show by the valor of arms and their courage" that they could conquer the people of Tula. In some versions of the myth, Malinalxoch was killed by the warriors and her son Copil stayed near Tula with those Aztecs who did not wish to go on with Huitzilopochtli's group. In other versions, she lived on and formed a community on the site where the confrontation took place.

In this mythic restatement of events, we can see a break from the lines of authority that included women. The direct appeal to force of arms and valor in combat became the basis for the Aztec climb to power in the plateau settled by descendants of the Toltec and earlier Teotihuacan civilizations. Malinalxoch's claim on the allegiance of the Aztec tribe may have been settled mythologically when her son, Copil, went to Chapultepec to avenge his mother and was killed. But where his heart was buried, there the Aztecs chose the site of their capital, Tenochtitlan.

Shortly after the Aztecs arrived in Chapultepec, the present site of the park on the outskirts of Mexico City, the Aztecs asked the chief of the Culhuacans, Coxcox, for his daughter in marriage to their chief. According to the Ramirez codex, the god Huitzilopochtli declared that she should be sacrificed. Her father was invited to the wedding party but was appalled when he went into the chamber and found the priest dressed in his daughter's skin. The motive for the sacrifice, according to the codex, was to create a goddess of discord, or war, called Toci. The deeper motive might have been an attempt both to assert and validate the combative stance of the Aztecs in the heavily populated valley where they had chosen to live. At another level, it was an assertion of control and dominance over the women whom they took in marriage from the neighboring kingdoms. Whatever the latent motives were, the slaying of the princess aroused the hostility of the Culhuacans, and the Aztecs were forced to leave their settlement in Chapultepec. However, over a century

6. The Codex Ramirez is an edition of the Duran manuscript, translated as *The Aztecs: The History of the Indies of New Spain*, cited above.

later, in 1376, the Culhuacans agreed to give the son of a Culhaucan princess married to an Aztec as the first king of the Aztecs, Acamapichtli.

In the first 100 years of their residence in the central plateau, roughly from 1248, when they entered Chapultepec, to 1345, when they moved into Tenochtitlan, the Aztecs transformed themselves from what Peterson calls “belligerent agriculturists” to an “organization of priest warriors.”⁷ Structurally, this meant a shift from a tribe based on clans to a kingdom based on classes. Throughout their nomadic period and in the early years of residence in Chapultepec, the *calpul*, or territorially based kinship group, provided the basis for governance in a council of elders who elected a chief in charge of war and another in charge of civil and religious acts.⁸ The corporate ownership of land by the *calpul*, with redistribution in accord with the needs of each family, seemed to ensure egalitarian relations. At least by rough indices, women had equal rights in the law and in the economy. Men as well as women were punished by death for adultery, according to the Codex Mendocino.⁹ Women were active producers as well as vendors. They possessed property and rights within the *calpul* organization. They were curers as well as priestesses. It is more than likely that matrilineal descent characterized the Toltecs and possibly early Aztec society. Soustelle, drawing information from Saha-gún and the codices, states that, “in former times, women had the supreme power in Tula,” and in the beginning of the Aztec dynasty, the royal blood ran through the female line.¹⁰ The change to male dominance is alluded to in the Codex Florentine. There, the father is referred to as “the source of the lineage, who is administrator, who rears and teaches others, lives a model life, stores up for others and cares for his assets.” Mother, on the other hand, “has children and suckles them.” She, too, is sincere, and diligent, but also “vigilant, agile, energetic in work, watchful, solicitous and full of anxiety.” She teaches people, but also “serves others” and is “apprehensive for their welfare, careful, thrifty, and constantly at work.” However, when we look at the ideal great grandmother, she is said to be “the founder, the beginner of her lineage,” whereas there is no such designation for great grandfather.¹¹

Warfare appears to have been endemic among all the tribes in the central plateau from at least A.D. 800 until the arrival of the Spaniards. Wolf concludes that eleven of the major sites in Middle America showed

7. Frederick A. Peterson, *Ancient Mexico* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1959), p. 85.

8. Zurita; Garcia Icazbalceta, *Nueva colección de documentos para la historia de Mexico* (London, 1938), 3:71–227.

9. Codex Mendocino, also referred to as Codex Mendoza, edited and translated by James Cooper Clark, 3 vols. (London, 1938).

10. Jacques Soustelle, *The Daily Life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1962).

11. A. J. O. Anderson and C. E. Dibble, *General History of the Things of New Spain: Florentine Codex* (Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research, 1961), bk. 14, pt. 13, p. 2.

signs of battle or abandonment.¹² Toltec women appear to have participated in warfare at least up until the eleventh century. The Selden Codex¹³ includes a story dating from about 1038 of the “Princessa Guerillera” which tells of a woman who entered into combat for her father’s realm (fig. 1). Counseled by the priests to defend her rights to the throne, she went to the town of her fiancé and was wed. As the priest carried her in the wedding march, she was insulted by enemies of her father. Indignant, she returned to the town, and another priest urged her to revenge herself. She led a party of warriors that took the men prisoners. She had the sweet revenge of watching the sacrifice of the victims as their hearts were torn from their breasts. Then, in the Spanish interpretation of the Selden Codex, she and the prince were able “to live happily ever after.” Ixtlilxóchitl, an Aztec historian born in the early years of the conquest and educated by Spanish priests, tells how in the battle of the armies of Topiltzin in 1008 “many Tultec [sic] women fought violently helping their husbands, dying and finally all were killed, old people and servants, women and children.”¹⁴ Toltec women, living in the kingdom of Culhuacan, were the preferred wives of Aztec leaders and provided them with their first king, Acamapichtli. They were said to have “civilized” the Aztecs, and they surely must have had a profound effect on the customs of the tribe.

At the time Tenochtitlan was established in 1345, leadership of the tribe was still determined by the council of elders of the *calpul*. Four officials in the council exercised executive authority as judges, executioners, and mediators between civil and military chiefs. The supreme leader, *tlacutlo*, was chosen from among them. He was called the “father and mother of the people.” His vice emperor occupied the position of “Snake Woman,” or Cihuacóatl, an important goddess. Terminological reference to females at the highest levels, although the posts were occupied by men, suggests that women may have played leading political roles before the state was centralized.

As the Aztecs aligned themselves in the military combat between Xochimilco and Texcoco, a royal lineage emerged, a single dynasty providing the leaders of the military and bureaucracy. The Aztecs learned the skills of warfare from the Culhuacan and Tepanec armies, which they joined as mercenaries when they fought with Coxcox of Texcoco against Xochimilco and became partners in the booty of war.

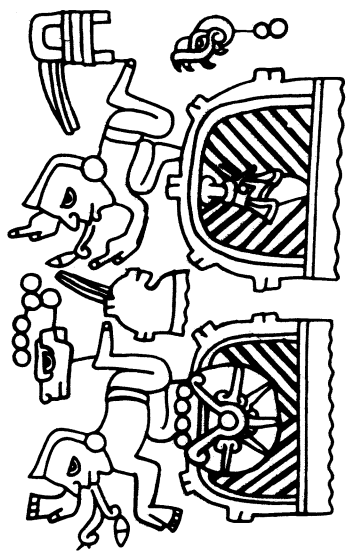
12. Eric Wolf, *Sons of the Shaking Earth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

13. Referred to in Maria Sten, *Las extraordinarias historias de los codices Mexicanos* (Mexico: Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, 1972). The Selden Codex from which this story was taken was bequeathed by Selden to the Bodleian Library of Oxford University in 1659. No other information is available on its date, but Edward Seler asserts that it relates to a people “completely Aztec in material culture.”

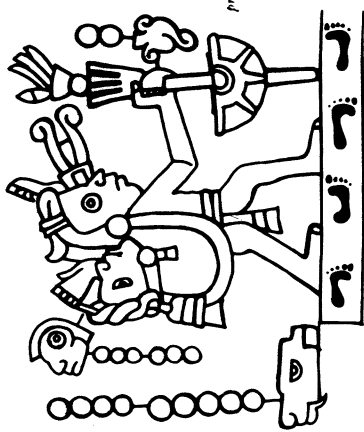
14. F. Ixtlilxóchitl de Alva, *Obras historicas*, 2 vols. (Mexico: Oficiana Tipografia de la Secretaria de Fomento, 1801), 1:52.



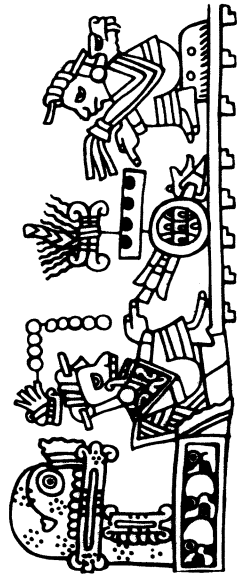
La boda se efectúa
en el año "10
Caña" [1035]
y hay un
suntuoso baile



En el camino, los amigos de la princesa la insultan



El sacerdote "2
Flor" lleva a la
princesa al pueblo
de su esposo



Indignada, vuela al lugar de Cañero y la sacerdotisa "9 Hierba"
le aconseja castigar a los rebeldes.

FIG. 1.—Selden Codex, the "Guerillera Princess"

Although succession within an agnatic descent group was emerging, a show of elections by the *calpul* (council leaders) was maintained. Acamapichtli, the “borrowed” king, son of the Culhuacan princess mentioned above, was brought in to rule in 1376. When he died in 1404, he was succeeded by his son Huitzilhuitl II. When Huitzilhuitl II married a daughter of a Tepanec ruler, peaceful relations seemed assured, and when the queen gave birth to a child, the monarchs of Tacuba, Azcapotzalco, and Coyoacan gave gifts to the royal couple. However, when the queen died, the sale of maize, beans, and other foods was stopped, and the Tepanecs later killed the child. Instead of waging war, the Aztecs chose to bide their time and invite neighbors to the funeral. The desire for a strong ruler led to the election of a natural son of Acamapichtli, Itzcóatl, who had already shown courage in warfare and statesmanship. The choice reinforced the right of the ruling dynasty to practice polygamy, which in itself weakened the role of women in the royal families since their sons were not guaranteed succession as in the past.

During Itzcóatl's reign from 1429–40, the Aztecs emerged as a predatory militaristic state on their own. He was ably abetted by his nephew, the military chief, Tlacaoel. Shortly after Itzcóatl became ruler, the Aztecs shifted their alliance from the Tepanecs to the Acolhua of Texcoco, who then helped them defeat the Tepanecs. With this victory, the Aztecs acquired lands, which they redistributed among the members of the royal lineage, with special allotments to those who had fought in the war. War leaders and chiefs in the bureaucracy received products of the lands tilled for them by prisoners, or *maceques*, taken in battle. The military chief established rights to titles for those who showed valor in combat, but all those who received titles were brothers and nephews of the king.

An important structural change came in the wake of the victory over the Tepanecs. The succession of a ruler was determined by four lords of the royal lineage, whose choice was restricted to siblings or male descendants of the king. It was at this point that an agnatic royal lineage can be said to have been established.¹⁵ This institutionalization of the royal dynasty in title, land, and tribute labor marked the final break with the democratic *calpul*. The control over land shifted to the royal lineage, and the parasitic economy of war took priority over the productive economy of the *macehuales*, or commoners, who tilled the land and produced craft goods.

The division of labor by sex had been well established by the late fifteenth century. The codices show men teaching boys to fish, cultivate, and work metal and women teaching girls to weave, tend babies, and

15. Duran, pp. 71–72.

cook (see fig. 2).¹⁶ What is often left out of the summary accounts is the fact that women were destined not only to perform domestic roles but were also professional doctors, priestesses, and merchants in local trade; among the *macehuales*, women were horticulturalists and hunted small animals. Hellbom points out, in comparing Sahagún's text with the pictures of the Florentine codex (which was the basis of Sahagún's elicited explanations and descriptions in the *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*) that there was a consistent tendency in the text to gloss over sex distinctions visible in the pictures and to refer only to men in those occupations the Spaniards associated with the male gender.¹⁷ This tendency was, of course, built into Spanish, where plural forms always take the male gender.

While women did not seem to be losing their importance in the domestic economy during the rise of the military dynasty, they were not becoming a part of the new predatory economy of war and tribute. We can only guess the reason for this, but the effect was to reinforce the specialization by men in those pursuits. In the late Aztec period, just before the conquest, Soustelle describes that at birth boys were given a shield with four arrows. The midwife prayed that they might be courageous warriors. They were presented four times to the sun and told of the uncertainties of life and the need to go to war. Girls, on the other hand, were given spindles and shuttles as a symbol of their future dedication to homely tasks. While both boys and girls were admitted to the *calmecac*, or training school for the priesthood and bureaucracy, the *tepochcalli*, or training school for the military was reserved for boys. Here, physical work for the community was stressed. Moral discipline was lax, and after school, the boys repaired to the "house of singing and revelry" and were encouraged to indulge in sex. In the youth houses dedicated to war, boys entered a ranked hierarchy: one who had taken a prisoner in war received a share of the tribute and gained entry as commander in the war councils. The various levels of privilege were given public recognition after a victorious war when booty was distributed.¹⁸ So rigid was the division of labor by sex that the tools and raw materials used by women became a metaphor for subordination and humility. In 1410, when Tezozomoc, the tyrant of Azcapotzalco wished to insult Ixtlilxóchitl, the king of Texcoco, he sent an ambassador with a cargo of raw cotton. As Bernal says of this incident: "This indicated, according to Indian custom, that he considered Ixtlilxóchitl as a weak woman who was only capable of spinning cotton."¹⁹

16. Anderson and Dibble, bk. 10, pt. 2, pp. 106–22.

17. Annabritta Hellbom, *La participación cultural de las mujeres indias y mestizas en el México precortesiano y postrevolucionario*, Monograph Series Publication no. 10 (Stockholm: Ethnographical Museum, 1967), p. 130.

18. Soustelle, pp. 84–85, 103–4.

19. Ignacio Bernal, *Tenochtitlan en una isla* (Mexico: Utopia, Compañía Editoria, 1976).

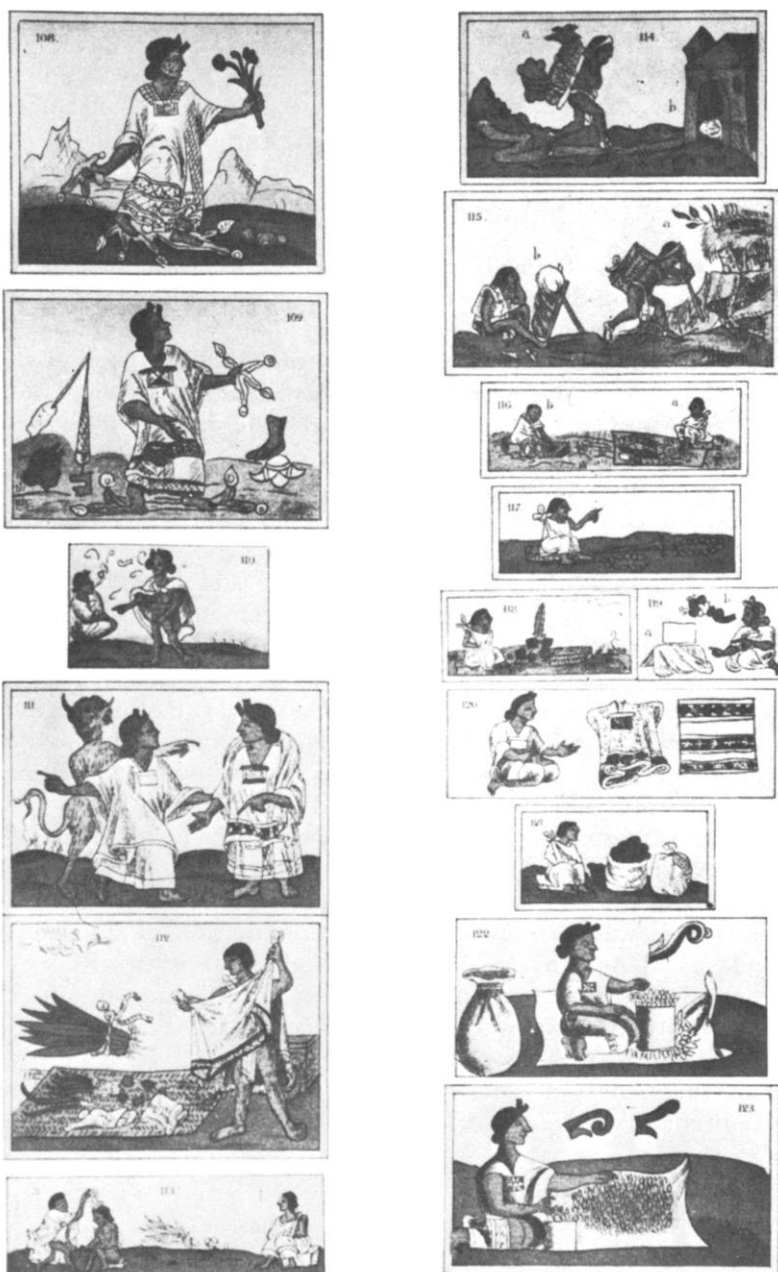


FIG. 2.—Codex Florentine, women's and men's work

As men became specialists in warfare, women became the booty to be shared by the victors. Why this happened we can only surmise from the fact that the Aztec warlords recognized the sexual needs of men cut off from their wives and lovers. When the Aztecs dominated the other cities of the plateau and brought them into the empire as tribute-paying subjects, the soldiers seized the women of the conquered cities at will. This was one of the most common complaints the Spaniards heard from the people as they marched inland from Cempoali to Tlatelolco.²⁰ Aztec barracks were provided with brothels where captive women were made available to the conquering heroes.

The licensed immorality of the soldiers and the destructiveness of the predatory wars created enemies at home as well as abroad. There is some evidence that women protested the devastation of wars and the loss of their husbands and male children. They deplored the festivities for the deadly destiny of the young warriors, although often they did not dare do much more than cry for the many sacrificial victims.²¹ Duran described the ceremonies of mourning when their husbands left for war.²² In a society which glorified the soldier who died in battle and proclaimed his immortal glory, these mourning rites might well be taken for resistance and defiance. This in itself is tentative reasoning, since such rituals can also be interpreted as a means of siphoning off discontent. However, another incident reveals the surfacing of discontent by women. The alliance between the rival city of Tlatelolco to fight with Tenochtitlan was broken when the Tlatelolcan women “flaunted their backsides at the enraged Tenocha visitors” when they came on a state visit.²³ Bancroft interprets this behavior as a direct affront by the women, who detested the military alliance with the Aztecs that took their husbands and sons away from them.

It was during Itzcóatl's reign that history, and the ideology that was drawn from it, was reorganized to conform to the changing social structure. Itzcóatl destroyed all the painted documents. Recent re-interpretations of the Aztec and Spanish sources suggest that he commissioned the rewriting of a mythology that validated the wars of conquest.²⁴ In this mythic reconstruction, we can see even more clearly the thrust of the military elite that dominated Aztec society toward legitimizing the predatory conquests. The term “flowery wars” was applied to the

20. Ignacio Bernal, *Mexico before Cortez* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1965), p. 114.

21. Hellbom, p. 264.

22. Duran, p. 106.

23. Bancroft, quoted in George Vaillant, *The Aztecs of Mexico* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1965), p. 114.

24. See Mario Erdheim, “Ideología de los Aztecas,” unpublished MS (Zurich); T. R. Fehrenbach, *Fire and Blood: A History of Mexico* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1973); and R. C. Padden, *The Hummingbird and the Hawk: Conquest and Sovereignty in the Valley of Mexico, 1503–1541* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1967).

battles carried out to acquire the hearts of captives for rituals for feeding the sun and keeping it in motion. These wars justified the predatory conquests in search of tribute and loot.

Theological doctrines paralleled the structural changes in Aztec society. First, there was the emergence of a single god at the apex of a hierarchy of male gods, and second, the eclipse of female deities related to fertility, nourishment, and the agricultural complex. These deities did not die out but persisted as the major figures in the worship of the submerged *macehuales*. The first trend can be seen in that the central hierarchy of the gods mirrored the royal council of Tenochtitlan. Tezcatlipoca, the Culhuacan god of war, was at the apex of four deities. He encompassed the Aztec tribal god, Huitzilopochtli; the Culhuacan god Quetzalcóatl, who was his rival in the myths of the Tula; and finally Xipe Totec, the Zapotec sacrificial victim. Huitzilopochtli was said to have chosen the Mexica for a great mission to bring together all the nations into the service of the sun. By rationalizing the conquests in the interest of feeding the sun with the hearts of slain captives, he tried to validate predatory combat. As Erdheim points out, in the flowery wars with neighboring city states, the military elite not only tried to prove this thesis but also gained a mechanism of selection for leadership and prestige in the military ranks.

In their sacrificial ceremonies, the Aztecs acted out this ideology. As they drenched the sun stone with blood, they glorified the cult of male dominance. There is some evidence of the resistance of some of the *tlamatini*, or intellectuals, to the transformation of the central hierarchy of gods and the replacement of the genitor and genetrix gods with Tezcatlipoca. Some continued to believe in the Lord and Lady of Duality, Ometecuhtli and Omecihuatl. The early deities seemed to capture the balanced oppositions of life and death, light and dark, as well as masculine and feminine, in androgynous representations. Recent studies of the mural of Tlaloc, found in the pyramids of Teotihuacan,²⁵ indicate that this representation may have been an androgynous or even female deity. Coatlicue, the "Lady of the Snaky Skirt" (see figs. 3 and 4) also seems to encompass these dualities, and the art critic, Fernandez, gives strong evidence that it is an androgynous icon.²⁶ Although Coatlicue is referred to as the mother of Huitzilopochtli, she did not share residence in the principal temples built in Tenochtitlan in the latter part of the fifteenth century. The principle of complementarity between the sexes seemed to be dying out as sex antagonism grew in the course of conquest.

Resistance to the cult of Huitzilopochtli was strongest in the outer

25. Esther Pasztor, *The Murals of Tepantitla, Teotihuacan* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1976).

26. Justino Fernandez, *Coatlicue: Estelica del arte indigena Antigua* (Mexico: Instituto de Investigaciones Aesteticas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico, 1959), p. 230.

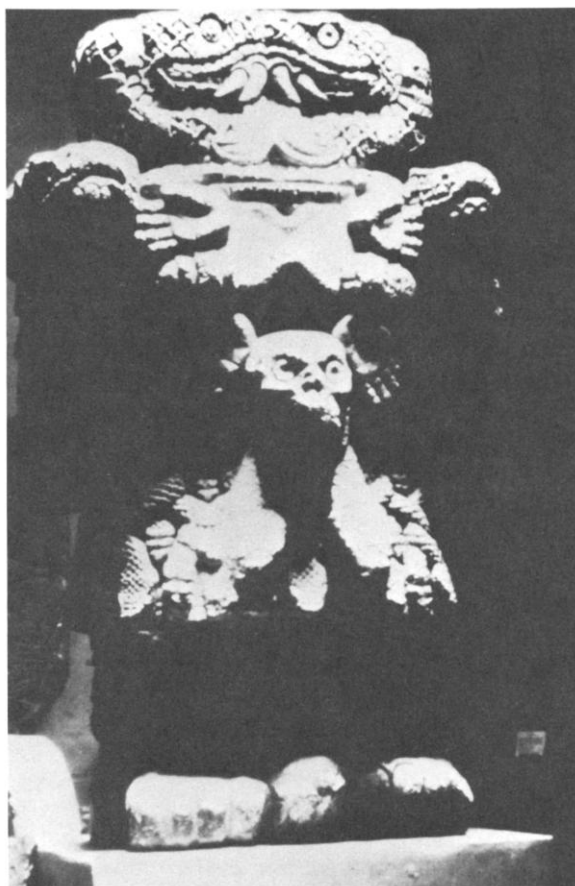


FIG. 3.—Coatlicue

regions of the empire. In the Totonac area, it was blocked by a cult of the Goddess of Heavens. According to Padden, this cult forbade human sacrifice and became the refuge for the opponents of the theologians of the center.²⁷ Despite the loss of position in the state and imperial iconography, female deities and those associated with crops and rain survived in the domestic and local pantheon. The three goddesses who supported and, in turn, were venerated by the common people were Chalchiuhtlicue, goddess of sweet or inland water; Chicomecóatl, goddess of food; and Huixtocihuatl, goddess of salt. Along with them, Tlaloc retained importance in the ceremonials of the agriculturalists. The Florentine codex reveals the importance of female deities along with male deities in charge of craft workers of both sexes. Thus, we can see that the

27. Padden, p. 88.

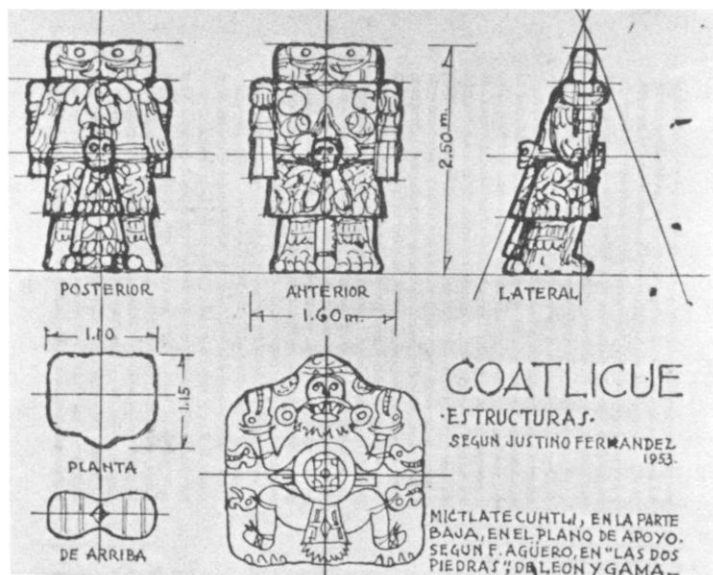


FIG. 4.—Front, back, and side views of Coatlícue

subordination of female deities was specific as to class and was correlated with male dominance in the elite ranks of the military, priesthood, and bureaucracy. While we cannot assert that there is a direct relation between status of females in the temporal and supernatural world, the class differences in the projection of gods and goddesses parallels the changes that we can see in the other institutions of Aztec society.

The hegemony of the nobility and the military came to a peak in the reign of Montezuma I, A.D. 1440. The leaders of the *calpul* no longer had power in state affairs. The free lands of the *macehuales* were encroached upon by the elite, and debt peonage increased. Plebians participated less and less frequently in state feasts and ceremonies. In the latter days of the empire, the nobility literally began to “consume” the *macehuales*. Padden accepts the testimony of those who said that Montezuma fattened up young boys and served the sacrificial victims with squash to his lords and priests.²⁸

In a period of less than three centuries, Aztec social structure was transformed from the egalitarian traditions of a wandering tribe to those of a predatory empire. Although women retained an important productive role in crafts, agriculture, and trade, their inability to enter the military and bureaucracy because of sex specialization in these activities meant that they did not have access to the new streams of wealth and prestige. The Aztecs never succeeded in consolidating the state under

28. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

military rule. The rejection of the balanced duality that characterized them at an earlier stage may have undermined their ability to defend themselves against the Spaniards. In their licentious conduct with the women of conquered tribes and in the disparities in their redistribution of tribute, they seemed to have subverted the basic solidarity of men and women and of noble and commoner in their own society. In the final days of the siege of Tenochtitlan, they could not mobilize the populace for the defense of the city, nor could they draw on support throughout the empire. The enmity with the conquered Tlaxcalans, who became the allies of the Spaniards, was a decisive factor in their final defeat.

The emergence of a public sphere dominated by a male elite among the Aztecs parallels the development of the state in Rome and in medieval Europe.²⁹ The difference is that, unlike European women, Aztec women retained a productive role and rights in the *calpul*. While European women were cut off from a range of opportunities available in the public sphere, Aztec women were limited to local markets, although they were in effect denied access to mobility and prestige in the growing branches of the economy based on tribute and warfare. A comparison of such historical accounts will not only clarify that process but will also lay to rest the ahistorical generalization that women have always and everywhere been subordinated in ideology, if not in fact, to males.

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29. Rayna Rapp Reiter, "Public and Private Domains," *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975).