

## Great Goddesses of the Aztecs: Their Meaning and Functions<sup>1</sup>

El presente artículo examina algunos aspectos de las diosas veneradas durante el imperio azteca, enfocando especialmente a Coyolxauhqui y, en relación con Quetzacoatl, a las diosas de la tierra. Tomando en cuenta algunas consideraciones de otras tradiciones religiosas, sugiere que Coyolxauhqui en efecto fue sacrificada; particularmente se destacan, además, los aspectos políticos de la conexión de Quetzalcoatl con algunas diosas muy importantes.

One of the most characteristic features of the Aztec pantheon is the 'arrangement' of deities into different complexes: one deity could at the same time be included in various ones. Part of the amazement about this feature was due to the ancient Mexican religion students' unfamiliarity with other religious traditions; and many of these include different manifestations of the sacred. Especially intriguing is the so-called *Earth-Mother Goddess* complex, in which Nicholson has included 21 goddesses.

Interest for the important female deities was increased after the dramatic discovery of the representation of dismembered Coyolxauhqui on Feb. 21, 1978. This magnificent piece (with a diameter varying from 2.95 to 3.25 m, a thickness of 30 to 35 cm, and a maximum height of relief of 10 cm) shows the body of the moon goddess after she was slain by Huitzilopochtli:

Luego con ella hirió a Coyolxauhqui,  
le cortó la cabeza,  
la cual vino a quedar abandonada  
en la ladera de Coatépetl,  
montaña de la serpiente.  
El cuerpo de Coyolxauhqui  
fue rodando hacia abajo,  
cayó hecho pedazos

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por diversas partes cayeron sus manos,  
sus piernas, su cuerpo.

(*Códice Florentino*, Lib. III, Cap. I, León-Portilla 1963; reprinted in Matos and Ehrenberg 1979: 6)

Dismembering of the deities is present in many traditions; it may have cosmological (Ymir in Nordic mythology; Puruṣa in Hindu) or ritual function (Sati in Hindu mythology; Osiris in Egyptian) - but it is not clear how we should interpret the slaying of this goddess. Different functions have been suggested, but also different 'readings' of the myth: while some authors (León-Portilla 1987; Hultkrantz 1979) suggest that she was slain accidentally (i.e., she was heading to warn Huitzilopochtli), others (Carrasco in ER 5) 'read' the event as it was written down, presenting her as an inspirer and leader of 400 southerners. Cosmological interpretation has been suggested on account of her transformation into the moon, and her brothers' into the Pleiades, especially considering Huitzilopochtli as a sun god (cf. Soustelle 1940: 8-9). But this slaying might have had a purely ritual function: a two-headed serpent around Coyolxauhqui's waist is tied into a knot; there are also serpents tied in this way around her arms and legs, and we know from other Mesoamerican traditions that knots were used as 'marks' of the sacrificial victims. Is it possible that the great Méxica Aztec warrior god did not kill, but sacrificed his sister?<sup>2</sup>

Other deities that belong to this complex and that were venerated in the time of Aztec supremacy also give rise to some interesting questions regarding their interpretation. Ochpaniztli was the Aztec month in which ceremonies were held in honor of four aspects of the Great Goddess: Cihuateotl ('the Goddess'), Atlantonan ('Our Mother of Atlan'), Chicomecoatl ('Seven Snake'), and Toci ('Grandmother').

The first was the latrian form of that bevy of sinister female spirits called the 'goddesses' (Cihuateteo). The second was Magna Mother as she patronized certain diseases and maimings and who was additionally connected with water. The third was the Aztec Ceres, the provider of fruits and grains from the earth, particularly maize. The last was a grandly inclusive goddess, the mother of gods, a war goddess, a corn goddess, maker of earthquakes, and patroness of sweatbaths and curing (Brundage 1985: 51).

Rituals connected with this month have already been described in full detail, and I do not intend to repeat these descriptions. However, it should be noted that all activities were divided according to the goddesses' specific functions.

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2 I am not suggesting that we should deliberately use data from various Mesoamerican cultures and insert them wherever it suits us (and it seems that this is the way in which many authors regard the so-called 'direct historical approach'), but in this case the figure itself requires a little bit broader context of possible explanation. For the problems of interpretation, cf. Matos and Ehrenberg (1979: 70), for the interpretations of Aztec sacrifice, I refer to Anawalt (1982).

For example, the *ixiptla* of Toci (who was an 'import' deity, the Aztec version of the great Huastec mother Tlazolteotl) was forced to spin cotton - and spinning and weaving are important attributes of the moon goddesses in the variety of traditions (in fact, Tlazolteotl was the moon goddess). Among the 'warrior aspects', the most famous representation is the 2.57 m high sculpture of Coatlicue ('Serpent skirt') at the Mexican Museo Nacional de Antropología: the bare breasted mother of gods all arrayed with snakes, severed serpent heads, human hands and hearts, skulls ... Her hands and feet end in claws because she feeds on corpses. Thus she is "diosa de la tierra, del nacimiento y de la vejez, misterio del origen y del fin, antigüedad y feminidad" (Justino Fernández in León-Portilla 1971: 575). While we have no information on who might have been the father of Coyolxauhqui and her 400 brothers, Huitzilopochtli was conceived in a miraculous way: while Coatlicue was sweeping on the sacred mountain Coatepec, a ball of feathers fell from the sky. She pressed it to her breast and immediately became pregnant.

This strange event resembles the Feathered Serpent or Quetzalcoatl, great Toltec deity and ancestor of their ruling dynasty. According to the hymn that was sung during the Aztec festival Atamalqualiztli (Brundage 1985: 32 ff.), Quetzalcoatl in his fierce aspect as dog-headed Xolotl, carries the corn goddess Xochiquetzal into the underworld and rapes her, after which she gives birth to the young maize god Cinteotl. Another myth (León-Portilla 1971: 475 ff.)<sup>3</sup> speaks of Quetzalcoatl's descent into the underworld for bringing the ancestors' bones which will be melted by the earth goddess Cihuateotl ('Snake Woman') and sprinkled with blood from Quetzalcoatl's penis, thus making the alloy for the creation of mankind. There is also a legend of Quetzalcoatl (as a ruler of Tollan) as son of the hunting god Mixcoatl ('Cloud Snake') and yet another earth goddess, Chimalma.

It is obvious from all this that the relationships of this god with the vast number of earth goddesses are extremely complex. It seems that in the period preceding the Conquest these goddesses were responsible for certain 'amalgamatic' concepts that were supposed to unite different beliefs belonging to different traditions. Teotihuacán Feathered Serpent, Toltec Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, and Aztec Quetzalcoatl are not the same god, though all may have some common traits. But for the Aztec priests it was necessary to legitimate their people as the logical successor and inheritor of the former cultures. The ball of feathers falling from the sky and impregnating Coatlicue was just one of the ways fulfill this task.

Finally, a note should be added about the principle of duality that was so characteristic for the Mexican religion, briefly expressed in the following lines from vol. VIII, fol. 175 of the *Textos de Informantes Indígenas* (León-Portilla 1971: 485):

Y sabían los toltecas  
que muchos son los cielos,

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3 In the variant of this myth in Thompson (1933: 162) this is Xolotl's task.

decían que son doce divisiones superpuestas.  
Allá vive el verdadero dios y su comparte.  
El dios celestial se llama Señor de la dualidad, Ometecuhtli,  
y su comparte se llama Señora de la dualidad, Omecíhuatl, Señora ce-  
leste;  
quiere decir:  
sobre los doce cielos es rey, es señor.

This dual deity was also known as Ometeotl, which David Carrasco (DR: 241) considers as "the fundamental divine power in central Mesoamerican religion". The male 'part' of this Supreme God was identified with the sun, the female one with the earth. As Tonacatecuhtli and Tonacacihuatl they were regarded, respectively, as 'Lord' and 'Lady of Our Flesh'. There has been a lot of dispute about the actual antiquity of this concept, since it is exclusively found in Postclassic cultures<sup>4</sup>, but it seems that it has grown out from the need to systematize the 'state cults'<sup>5</sup>.

## Abbreviations

- DdR: *Dictionnaire des religions. Sous le direction de Paul Poupard.* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1984 [2nd edition: 1985].
- DR: *Dictionary of Religions.* Edited by John R. Hinnels. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984.
- ER: *The Encyclopedia of Religion.* 16 Vols. Editor-in-chief: Mircea Eliade. London/New York: Macmillan, 1987.

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4 Although Soustelle (DdR: 1243) considers this concept to be much older among the Otomí, where it is represented by Otontecuhtli and Tzináná.

5 Or, as summed by Davies (1983: 221), the 'religion of the priests'.

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