

Aztec human sacrifice – a detached view assignment

[History](#)



In searching for a thesis for this paper, I was faced with a singular problem. With the ghastly subject of human sacrifice, what could possibly be argued and defended? During my reading and research, the stark and horrible reality of a butchered, battered, or burned human being slain in some grisly, weird ceremony for some equally weird gargoyle-like idol nearly caused me to choose another subject.

Yet, years ago, when I read Gary Jennings' novel *Aztec*, I was fascinated with his description of the Aztec's sacrifice of prisoners during the dedication of the great pyramid in Tenochitlan: " The hearts of ... perhaps the first two hundred of them, were ceremoniously ladled into the mouths of Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli until the statues' hollow insides could hold no more, and the stone lips of the two gods drooled and dribbled blood... Those who have read Jennings' novel know that the foregoing is but a mild example of some of the graphic barbarism he describes. During my first reading of that novel, I would have never believed that I could come to the conclusion of my thesis. My thesis is this: There appears to be an intolerable paradox between the barbarous religious practices and the rather high state of civilization in the Central Valley of Mexico.

This paradox undoubtedly led the early Spanish missionaries to regard the conquered Indians as devil worshipers. However, I believe that it is possible to regard the Aztecs as civilized people who also happened to perform human sacrifice. They performed human sacrifice in reaction to their view of the world and how they cope within it. Maintaining those two opposing viewpoints requires an understanding and a detached view which may have more to do with the study of history than the study of human sacrifice.

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The Aztecs, of course, had no monopoly on the practice of human sacrifice. Earlier cultures (the Maya, the Toltecs and others) provided the cultural base for human sacrifice upon which the Aztecs took to new heights. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, excavations in Egypt and elsewhere in the ancient Middle East have revealed that “ numerous servants were at times interred with the rest of the funerary equipment of a member of the royal family in order to provide that person with a retinue in the next life.

The burning of children seems to have occurred in Assyrian and Canaanite religions and at various times among the Israelites. Rites among the ancient Greeks and Romans that involved the killing of animals may have originally involved human victims. ” The Aztecs, as previously stated, took the practice to new heights. In 1487 (five years before Columbus arrived to the East and two years after Henry VII began the Tudor dynasty in England) the greatest orgy of bloodletting of human sacrifice occurred during the fierce rule of Ahuizotl.

I have already quoted Gary Jennings’ description of the carnage, and I will quote one more passage to illustrate how the Aztecs in a ceremony lasting four days sacrificed at least 20, 000 prisoners to their insatiable god Huitzilopochtli: “ The prisoners endlessly ascended the right side of the pyramid’s staircase, while the gashed bodies of their predecessors tumbled and rolled down the left side, kicked along by junior priests stationed at intervals, and while the gutter between the stairs carried a continuous stream of blood which puddled out among the feet of the crowd in the plaza... Although Jennings’ Aztec is, admittedly, a work of fiction, I have seen

his descriptions corroborated elsewhere; for example, G. C. Vaillant's *The Aztecs of Mexico* describes the scene: "... At the start of the dedication, the captives stood in two rows, and (they) began the grisly work of tearing out the victim's hearts..." Returning to my thesis, how could the practice of human sacrifice be looked upon as anything less than barbaric, even to the point where Aztecs could be regarded as uncivilized?

The answer, in my opinion, arises from their view of their creation, their position in the world, their relative importance therein, and how they were only holding on by a thread. If the Judeo-Christian God took only six days to create the heavens and earth (and rested on the seventh day), the Meso-American deity took awhile longer to get it right. The Aztecs believed that the sun and earth had been destroyed in a cataclysm and were regenerated four times.

They believed that they were living in the fifth, and final, stage of creation, and (according to Meyer and Sherman's *The Course of Mexican History*) "that in their age of their fifth sun, final destruction was imminent." Meyer and Sherman also point out another interesting (and revealing) aspect of how the Aztecs regarded themselves in the cycle of their cosmology. The accepted view of "a natural cycle" was that humans occupied a rather lowly position in the food chain of the gods.

The cycle held that since the sun and rain nourished plant life and sustained man, man should give sustenance to the sun and rain gods. One might infer from the foregoing view that the Aztecs placed a low value on human life. To add to the paradox of sacrifice versus civilization, the evidence is that the

Aztecs regarded the individual human as “ a most significant locus of the meditation of the human and divine. ” In *Aztecs – An Interpretation* by Inga Clendenin, the author focuses in on the actual meaning of the word “ sacrifice. In her analysis of the Nahuatl linguistic iterations covering the separate meanings of death and sacrifice, she (gradually) comes to the conclusion that Aztecs regarded sacrifice as a payment of the debt incurred and only fully extinguished by death, “... when the earth lords would feed upon the bodies of men, as men had perforce fed upon them. ” What I liked most about Inga Clenninden’s writings on the Aztec was her mixture of sometimes excruciating detailed scholarship (I had to have a dictionary handy at all times) along with her eventual arrival at the exquisite truth of the matter.

Concerning debt of humans to the gods she states the truth of the matter in two exquisitely perspicacious sentences: “.. (T)he Mexica knew that all humans, unequal as they might be in human arrangements, participated in the same desperate plight: an involuntary debt to the earthly deities, contracted through the ingestion of the fruits of the earth... It is that divine hunger which appears to underlay the gross feedings of undifferentiated mass killings. While everyone in Aztec society had the same debt, Aztec religion and its black-robed, blood-caked priests served to pay everyone’s daily dues for continuation in humanity’s last Tonatiuh yet a while longer. Through obeisance and observance of the needs of the pantheon of gods and with the complicity of the Aztec society at large (and often even with the active cooperation of the victims), the priests performed their killings, according to Clendinnen, openly and everywhere: “... not only in the main

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temple precinct, but in the neighborhood temples and on the streets. The Aztecs believed that without human sacrifice and the offering of the most precious and sacred thing the human possessed (blood), the sun might not rise to make its way across the sky. This rather strange and naive belief was supported by a mythology in which Huitzilopochtli, their fierce bloodthirsty god played a central part. But first, an explanation of the Aztecs' beliefs regarding the creation of their current age does shed some light on the role of sacrifice and Huitzilopochtli's cult, which later ran rampant and reached its zenith in the sacrifice of 20, 000 at the dedication of the temple in 1487.

A succinct description of Meso-American mythology appears in *The Daily Life of the Aztecs* by Jacques Soustelle. The ancient Mexicans believed that the two parent gods lived at the summit of the world. Their "unending fruitfulness" produced all the gods, and from it all mankind was born. The sun was born when "the gods gathered in the twilight at Teotihuacan and a little leprous god "covered with boils," threw himself into a huge brazier as a sacrifice and "rose from the blazing coals changed into a sun..." This sun was motionless and it needed blood to move.

So the gods "immolated themselves, and the sun, drawing life from their death began its course across the sky." To keep the sun moving on its course, "so that the darkness should not overwhelm the world forever, it was necessary to feed it every day with its food, 'the precious water'... human blood." Every time a priest fed the gods at the top of a pyramid, or in the local temple, the disaster that always threatened to fall upon the world

was postponed once more. About the time of the Crusades in Europe, the Aztecs migrated from the west into the Valley of Mexico.

They brought with them their strange hummingbird god Huitzilopochtli, who, according to Victor W. Vonhagen in his *The Aztec Man and Tribe* gave the Aztecs some rather sound advice: "... wander, look for lands, avoid any large-scale fighting, send pioneers ahead, have them plant maize, when the harvest is ready, move up to it; keep me,... always with you, carrying me like a banner, feed me on human hearts torn from the recently sacrificed. " ... all of which the Aztecs did. The mythology surrounding Huitzilopochtli's origins was also revealing.

The Aztecs believed themselves to be the " people of the sun. " This god's fierce preeminence is surpassed only by the Aztec view of his mother Coatlicue. Victor Von Hagen describes the Aztec sculpture of this powerful and awesome goddess: "... her head of twin serpents, her necklace of human hands and hearts, her arms claw-handed, and her skirt a mass of writhing serpents... " The Aztecs believed that Huitzilopochtli sprang alive and fierce from his mother to vanquish his brothers, the stars, and his sister, the moon who had conspired to kill his mother.

Coatlique, an earth goddess, conceived him after having kept in her bosom a ball of hummingbird feathers (i. e. , the soul of a warrior) that fell from the sky. His brothers, the stars of the southern sky, and his sister, a moon goddess, decided to kill him, but he exterminated them with his weapon, the turquoise snake. The Aztecs followed the hummingbird's twittering and

became the dominant culture of a civilization that by the time Cortes and his group of scruffy adventurers landed in 1517 numbered in the millions.

It is difficult to imagine an ancient, complex civilization like the Aztecs with a daily life that centered around the grisly practice of human sacrifice. The average Aztec only had to look at the stone idol of household god to be reminded of what nourished that particular deity. Deities other than Huitzilopochtli had their own feast days in the Aztec calendar and, accordingly, demanded their own sustenance. Slave children were drowned as an offering to the rain god Tlaloc. The fire god's victims were given hashish and thrown into the blaze.

Those who represented the god Xipe Totec were fastened to a frame, shot with arrows, and then had their corpse flayed (the priests dressed themselves in the skin representing the “ new skin” of spring). Here we have the phenomenon of how the person being sacrificed was symbolically transfigured into the image of the god and his own temple. In most cases the victim was dressed up so as to represent the god who was being worshiped. Just as the gods of old had accepted death, the person reenacted and became that sacrifice.

Moreover, according to Jaques Soustelle in *The Daily Life of the Aztecs*, “ when ritual cannibalism was practiced on certain occasions, it was the god's own flesh that the faithful ate in their bloody communion. ” As the Aztec cycle continued and a shortage of “ god food” occurred, the Aztec “ Flowery Wars” replenished that supply. Militarism, elevated to a virtue, became ever

intertwined with Aztec society. In fact, a warrior's status was determined by the number of captives he delivered to the sacrificial altar.

Whether as a battlefield casualty or ending up as a captive on the altar of an enemy tribe, this “flowery death” was desirable and noble, and a place in the clouds was reserved for that warrior. Returning one last time to Gary Jennings' graphic description of the prisoner sacrifice on that day in 1487, when long lines of captives shuffled along the avenues toward Tenochtitlan up the pyramid staircase towards the twin temples of Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli: “... any prisoners, however complacently they came to their fate, involuntarily emptied their bladders or bowels at the moment lying down under the knife. The priests – who... had been clad in their usual vulturine black of robes, lank hair, and unwashed skin – had become moving clots of red and brown, or coagulated blood, dried mucus, and a plaster of excrement...” It is indeed difficult to read of such gore and barbarism without relegating the Aztecs to the level normally reserved for far less developed and organized societies.

Although the Aztec period is considered by historians as not having reached the heights of civilizations of the classic period, it is clear that the Aztecs and the cultures of the Central Valley were sophisticated and well organized. There may have been as many as 30 million inhabitants of that area (although some scholars believe that count is somewhat exaggerated), and the breathtaking sight of Tenochtitlan must have impressed Cortes beyond words. The question remains: Does existence and abhorrent (to us) practice

of human sacrifice disqualify the Aztecs from full membership in the “club” of civilizations?

Apparently, the Spanish felt that the answer to the question was an unequivocal yes. The horror and disgust that newcomers must have felt may have helped the Spanish convince themselves that the native religion was another form of devil worship and provided subsequent justification for destroying their culture. Jaques Soustelle gets to the heart of the matter in *The Daily Life of the Aztecs*. He says that the Aztec practice of human sacrifice was a great factor in making the two religions which confronted one another totally irreconcilable.

In the early battles, some conquistadores ended up as captives and sacrificial victims of the Aztecs themselves, and this practice lent a particularly remorseless attitude on each side of the struggle between the Aztecs and the Spanish invaders. If we can understand the motives and the religious and cultural perspective of the Spanish, who massacred, burnt, mutilated and tortured their conquered natives, it is likely that the definition of cruelty differs from culture to culture. It follows, therefore, that it is possible to use the same perspective towards human sacrifice on the part of the Aztecs.

Works cited: Jennings, Gary, 1980, *Aztec* Von Hagen, Victor W. , 1958, *The Aztec, Man and Tribe* Vaillant, G. C. , 1944, *The Aztecs of Mexico* Clendinnen, Inga, 1991, *Aztecs An Interpretation* Meyer, Michael C. , and Sherman, William L. , 1995, *The Course of Mexican History Pre-Columbian Civilizations: MESO-AMERICAN CIVILIZATION: Postclassic Period (900-1519): AZTEC*

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