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The Nature of Aztec Deity Impersonators

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**"My Precious Teotl"**  
**The Nature of Aztec Deity Impersonators**

By  
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**THESIS**

for the  
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## INTRODUCTION

*Then arrive  
in order, in file  
all the teixiptlas,  
the representatives of all the teotls.  
They were called deputies,  
representatives, teixiptlas*<sup>1</sup>

A young man, a middle-aged woman, a young maiden, and a sculpted figure of dough all belong to a common symbolic system which permeates the monthly "feasts" celebrated by the Mexica, commonly known as the Aztecs. Most of what we know about the monthly feasts and moveable feasts come from the descriptions published by Fray Bernardino de Sahagun (1569) and Fray Diego de Duran (1581). The general plan of events in the festival calendar consisted of fasting,<sup>2</sup> songs, dances, procesions, construction of idols and ritual objects, and decoration of people, houses, and temples. Preparation continued throughout the month, of twenty days, prior to the culminating event, the sacrifice of the teixiptla or deity impersonator (Nicholson 1971:431).<sup>3</sup>

This thesis analyzes the nature of the deity impersonators, who they were, what their function was in the feast context, and what implications they had in

in Aztec society. To better illustrate the phenomenon, it looks directly at those feasts dedicated to the two principal deities of the Mexica, Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli. Before looking at what it means to "impersonate" a deity, it is necessary to understand what the Aztec concept of "deity" was.

## TEOTLS

The Aztec people performed their rituals and offerings to teotls, those entities that some Westerners generally refer to as gods or deities, such as Quetzalcoatl. Others believe that teotls were not divine beings as we conceive of God, but an all pervasive natural force (van Zantwijk 1985:128-130). I would further add that I believe that the teotls represent specific life forces or concentrations of intelligence or consciousness that had to be reckoned with. In another sense, teotl was the Sun, the driving force of the universe, who was pushed across the heavens by the spirits of those humans who died on the battlefield or on the sacrificial stone (Hvidtfeldt 1958:77). Whatever their classification, the teotls directed the universe. They derived Cosmos from Chaos and made sure that Man had what he needed to occupy the Earth. They, in turn, required humans to "repay" or replenish the natural forces, supernatural power, through ritual acts. The act of Creation stipulated an automatic pact between Man and the supernatural (Hvidtfeldt 1958:59-61).

A classification of teotl beings or forces consists of three groups: nature teotls, progenitor teotls, and patron teotls (Nicholson 1971:410-30; Berdan 1982:125;

van Zantwijk 1985:207). The nature teotls, rain, sun, and fertility, are animistic whereas the progenitor and patron teotls are the pervasive consciousness or intelligence. In order for the Aztecs to deal with their abstracted "gods", they associated specific teotl images with a natural or social phenomenon. In addition, myth and calpulli (ethnic neighborhood) status all contributed to the teotls' mask, costume, and commemorative ritual. For example, Tlaloc's (rain teotl) costume and headdress consisted of white heron feathers and spotted paper to represent storm clouds, green and blue colors represented water, a single feather in his headdress was the "precious blade" of corn, a flowered staff represented fertility, and his jade seat and jewelery, plus his goggle mask of a double-headed serpent, all held connotations of the heavens and supernatural power (Caso 1958: 43). Each teotl costume was a different combination of supernaturally charged elements that I believe channeled sacred power to the terrestrial world. So, within the Aztec scheme of things, teotls were not solely related to Nature. In Nahuatl texts, teotl may refer to ancestral rulers, impersonators, priest-bearers of teotl bundles, the bundles themselves, or even those persons who prophesized the wishes of the "gods" (Lopez-Austin 1973:53-72). Now, with a general notion of what the Aztecs were honoring, the paper can look at how they did

so.

## THE ROLE OF TEIXIPTLAS

Feasts of the ritual calendar, as well as other special events, marked the interaction of various social classes and ethnic groups in Aztec society. Depending on the occasion, the nobility, the commoners, the priests, and the pochteca merchants participated in the preparations and the ceremony itself. The principal players in these festivals were the teixiptla, the impersonators. In an emic sense, "impersonator" is not an accurate translation, but it does reflect the fact that the people dressed in the regalia associated with the specified teotl, and they received royal treatment and respect from the entire community. Men, women, and children became impersonators as prescribed by the ritual and teotl to be represented. Select war captives and slaves, criminals and delinquent servants, purchased in the markets of Azcapotzalco or Itzocan supplied the necessary slaves (van Zantwijk 1985:168-9; Sahagun 1981: 143).

Costumed people were not the only forms of teixiptla used. Many of the rituals, as described by Sahagun and Duran, called for the sacrifice of idols formed of tzoalli<sup>4</sup> dough, and some, like for the feast for Xiuh-tecuhtli, required the construction of wooden manikins,

clothed and holding regalia. These inanimate teixiptla often were life-size, they sat on thrones, and were carried in litters. In some instances, the descriptions do not make clear as to whether the impersonator was a person or a figure. The important idea, though, is that there was no distinguishing the two in the Aztec mind (Hvidtfeldt 1958:87). The ultimate role for the impersonator was to die on the sacrificial stone. At this point, his heart, blood, and flesh were of value, and all belonged to the sponsoring calpulli. Some occasions called for the decapitation and flaying of the victim's skin. On the other hand, in the Florentine Codex, Sahagun tells of how fire priests performed certain rituals, like the New Fire Ceremony,<sup>5</sup> dressed as deity impersonators. There also existed diviners who rendered their services in the guise of teotls.<sup>6</sup>

Teixiptla destined for sacrifice were worshipped not as if they were incarnations, but as if they were, themselves, sacred objects. The captors, purchasers, or calpulli priests provided them with the finest garments, foods, and accommodations. Some could move freely about in public with attendants while others, specifically war captives, were kept within the confines of the temple residences. They even required training for the feast performance which included dances, songs, and instruments

to be played. The responsibility of those closest to the impersonator was to keep him in high spirits. A morose teixiptla was an ill omen (Lopez-Austin 1973:58-72; van Zantwijk 1985:168). Another way to look at teixiptla sacrifice is to think of the impersonator as a sacred vessel, like those used to hold hearts,<sup>7</sup> and the act of removing the heart of the victim is analogous to the transfer of divine sustenance from one plate to another. Reportedly, narcotic and psychological tactics were used in order to put the impersonators into specific emotional states for the sake of the upcoming feast performance. For example, the crying of children offered to the Tlaloque was encouraged because it foretold a season of plentiful rain, teixiptla dedicated to Xiuhtecuhtli, the fire teotl, drank beverages laced with tranquilizers before being thrown into bonfires, and the female impersonator of the fertility teotl, Chicomecoatl, was kept distracted by priests up to the very moment of her death, so as not to sadden her.

The deity impersonators were different from other victims, the captives and the "unbathed" slaves. Apparently, only those persons "free of defects" were purchased as teixiptlas. After all, one would not buy a cracked vessel in order to make offerings. The quality of the teixiptla reflected upon the wealth and prestige of his

sponsor and the calpulli. At some time before the feast day, all of the slaves were bathed in a sacred spring and afterwards they were known as "bathed ones" (Sahagun 1981: 143). The bathing rite is somewhat analogous to the one performed by midwives in Aztec society at the time of a child's birth. The midwife bathed the baby and then circled the wash basin four times with the child in her arms. Likewise, the teixiptla was bathed and escorted, in procession, by his sponsor or captor four times around the calpulli pyramid (Hvidfeldt 1958:110-11). The impersonators were literally re-born. Their sponsor became "father" and they became "son" (Berdan 1982:83). The rite removed their former identity as well as any previous sins. From Aztec society point of view, the teixiptla deserved respect for their role as links between the living and the supernatural. Originally, it was the civic duty of the elite to offer blood, as told in the Creation mythology, but they devised the system of appointing substitutes. Again, in the mythology it was ultimately the poor teotl, Nanahuatl, who threw himself into the divine bonfire to then become the sun (Nicholson 1971:402). Both the sponsor and his impersonator maintained a close relationship in the social and spiritual sense, up until the time of the sacrifice. They shared similar costumes and markings as they performed dances, took part in processions, and staged

events together. After the slaying of the impersonator, the priests awarded the sponsor with the trappings, hair, and select body parts of his teixiptla for a family feast. These were considered powerful talismans by the holder (van Zantwijk 1985:66-8).

Deity impersonators were the focal points of annual religious events. However, they also had important socio-political implications due to their "divine object" status. Aztec society offered few means through which to gain status and improve one's social class. The most feasible way for warriors and priests was to capture prisoners, and for the pochteca, it was the purchase of slaves in the market. Success was determined by the number of teixiptla that one could offer for sacrifice.

It appears that even if the institution of sacrifice underwent an intensification with the expansion of the empire, the number of teixiptla did not increase. Each feast had a given number of living impersonators, but the number of ordinary captives and slaves for sacrifice could vary. If the number of lesser nobles was indeed increasing faster than the tlatqani, the ruler, could invent bureaucratic offices, then there probably was a growing tension among the pilpiltin, the noble class, to distinguish themselves in the eyes of the tlatqani and receive a position of power. Likewise, the lower class merchants were trying to

improve their standing within the pochteca hierarchy. Each level required banquets and gift-giving of a certain degree. To reach the top levels, one had to buy and offer several teixiptla, a most costly enterprise that depended on one's trading abilities (van Zantwijk 1985:165-8). As a result, there was an increasing encroachment on the elite class by the merchants, though the elite always had a check on the pochteca. They could insist on the return of an intended impersonator if he proved to be an outstanding individual to the slave market, or they could buy the slave outright (van Zantwijk 1985:166-8). Even the tlatoni himself sponsored an impersonator. For example, in the feast of Toxcatl, the tlatoni offered a teixiptla whom he regarded as his "precious teotl." This was very significant for the ruler because it was the time of lean months and his show of recreating the act of the teotls in sustaining the Cosmos reflected on his ability to sustain the society and the people (Hvidtfeldt 1958:88-9).

## TLALOC AND HUITZILOPOCHTLI

An analysis of the role of deity impersonators in the feasts dedicated to Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli, the two principal teotls of the Mexica, will better illustrate how the elite exploited the symbolism, derived from myth, surrounding the teixiptla, for political purposes. Both teotls shared the largest temple pyramid that sat at the center of Tenochtitlan, capital of the Mexica city-state (Berdan 1982:10-11). On the north side was Tlaloc, the more ancient of the two, who was associated with rain, thunder and lightning, storms, hail, and so forth. About one third of the monthly festivals were in honor of Tlaloc or one of his lesser teotl companions, and they were held in conjunction with the rainy and dry seasons. Both human and tzoalli teixiptla entered the feast performances. The feast celebrated from May to June was Etzalcualiztli, the Eating of Etzal. It commemorated the successful planting of the crops and favorable conditions for farming. The common people were the agriculturalists, and they tended to have a more personal relationship with this particular teotl. Some willingly gave up one of their children as repayment. Etzal was a stew of corn and beans, a very luxurious dish for the normal citizen because most could not afford to use both staples at one meal, except at

this time. Four days before the feast day, the Tlaloc priests wove special petate mats for sleeping, they did blood-letting, they performed dances, and Tlaloc impersonators collected etzal from the community. The night before the feast, they kept the teixiptla at a vigil with rattle and drum playing. Then, after the sacrifices on the following day, the bodies of the teixiptla were buried in a cave at the Mountain of Tlaloc. The hearts of the other captives and slaves were thrown into the center of Lake Texcoco. The tlatoanis of the major city-states and other nobles left sumptuous offerings at the Tlaloc shrines up in the surrounding mountains (Sahagun 1981: 11-12, 78-88; Kuble and Gibson 1951: 34-5). The participation of the elite in the Tlaloc feasts helped maintain a good relationship between the classes because it showed that the nobility was interested in the appeasement of the commoners' teotl. Also, having a widely revered and basically important teotl common to most people meant that it would be easier to absorb other peoples into the empire without upsetting their ideological system. The teixiptla sacrificed in the feast of Tepehuitl, in October, represented another important notion in Aztec thought. During the entire month, all the people made images of mountains with tzoalli and then decorated them with the faces of persons who had died in water related accidents, from water-

borne diseases, or in the service of Tlaloc. Their bodies were buried in caves up in the mountains, the realm of the rains, the reason being that the spirit of these people joined Tlaloc as Tlaloque, the lesser teotls responsible for spreading rain. Numerous sacrifices could only mean more help in the bringing of rain (Sahagun 1981:23-4;Kuble and Gibson 1951:51-2).

To the left side of Tlaloc was the patron teotl of the Mexica, Huitzilopochtli, and his principal feast was that of Panquetzaliztli, the Raising of Banners. The title tells much about the nature of the feast. Raising banners was done as warriors went into battle, and this festival commemorated Huitzilopochtli as patron of the city-state and warfare. It also honored the nobility and their own calpullis as well as the superiority of Tenochtitlan within the Valley of Mexico. The merchants also had their opportunity to make their offerings of teixiptla.

Again, both forms of impersonators were included, human and tzoalli. In fact, Huitzilopochtli may have been the ancestor to the deity impersonator. According to one myth, the leading priest of the wandering Mexica tribe, Huitziti, united with their all-powerful lord, Tezauhtotl, and then became their divine leader whom we know as Huitzilopochtli (Gonzalez-Torres 1979:9). For the feast, a life-size figure of the patron teotl was placed in the temple, and a smaller one of his double, Paynal. The

pochtli) have light, sky, culture, civilization, and nobility associations. This stems back to the creation myth of the Sun and the Moon where the rich teotl, Tecciztecatl, offered copal, red coral spines representing blood sacrifice, and the poor teotl offered balls of grass and maguey thorns stained with his own blood (Nicholson 1971: 17). The actual giving of blood was performed by the commoner and that of the elite was disguised or symbolic.<sup>9</sup>

early part of the month (November to December) was spent making offerings and having processions, on the part of the priests and the sponsors. The pochteca sponsors gave banquets. On the feast day, the serpent dance was performed and then two select young men began the ritual circuit of the city. They began with the sacrifice of four impersonators in the ballcourt. Then, they ran through the city districts while a mock battle was waged between the teixiptla and the captives of the Huitznahuac calpulli, who were only of the Tlaxcalans.<sup>8</sup> At the end of these events, the captives, the slaves, and then the impersonators were sacrificed. The tzoalli figures were distributed among the participants and their calpullis as well as the bodies of the teixiptla (Sahagun 1981:143). The feast of Panquetzaliztli occasioned a show of the Aztecs' superiority over their enemies and a celebration of their military prowess. Again, there was a demonstration of the ruler's success at feeding his people through warfare and sacrifice.

The basic dualism demonstrated by the two principal teotls directly relates to the phenomenon of the deity impersonator. Gonzalez-Torres (1979:12) identifies teotls according to their "hot" and "cold" aspects. Nature teotls (Tlaloc) have darkness, earth, agriculture, and commoner associations, whereas patron teotls (Huitzilo-

## SYMBOLISM

The entire institution of the ritual calendar feasts and the sacrifice of teixiptla grew up around food and eating symbolism. The notion of "feast," the preparing of large banquets, and eating exotic or luxury food (human flesh included) all created a show of a bounty of food-stuffs and the ability to consume great amounts, in contrast to those three weeks of privation. There also was the constant reinforcement of the elites' ability to provide for the state and its people through distribution of teixiptla flesh, awarding of tzoalli, and symbolic blood sacrifice. It was, undoubtedly, crucial to exhibit abundance in order to maintain peace and respect from the public and from those outside the state, even if the food supply was barely adequate. The sustenance and consumption symbolism supposedly began with the teotl forces and the Creation myth, but an idea of transformation lies beneath it.

The civil duty of the elite was to make blood sacrifices, but they did not offer their own. They sent an impersonator, an ambassador of sorts, into the public realm and ultimately, into the supernatural realm. His heart and blood sustained the Sun and his spirit helped push it across the sky. When the teixiptla were ritually

reborn, they did not become sacred persons, but sacred objects, "containers." The morpheme "xip" in Nahuatl means a covering, a skin, or shell, which tends to imply the notion of a vessel (Hvidtfeldt 1958:78-87). A purified and adorned deity impersonator not only was a "container," but also a lightning rod for attracting the sacred power of the teotl forces. As a source of power, the nobility used the teixiptla to help them keep their position in society and to justify it. As Hvidtfeldt explained about state development (1958:47-55), divinity was no longer solely associated with Nature, but with concepts of "god," rituals, and mass participation. Things which state authority could manipulate and benefit from. The meat and regalia of the impersonators were reserved to the upper classes, and the tzoalli figures were left for the common people. The death of the impersonator marked a transition from scarcity to abundance, life from death. Even the butchering of his body into parts, may have its origin in myth symbolism. One version tells how the son of the first couple, Centeotl, died and was buried and from various parts of his body the food crops grew (Nicholson 1971:400-403). Thus, there was a transformation of supernatural power into the living and living power into the supernatural. Furthermore, the process of eating is analogous in that humans consume food for energy

and life which goes on to allow people to produce food again from that energy. It can be thought of as something like a water cycle. Sacred power emanates from living things (humidity) and concentrates into teotl forces (clouds). The impersonator attracts this energy (condensation), and with his death (evaporation) he replenishes the supernatural supply.

## CONCLUSION

Religion, economics, and politics imbued the institution of deity impersonators and their sacrifice during the monthly feasts and state occasions. The Aztec people lived by a detailed ritual calendar designed to appease the many teotl forces identified as specific entities. Supernatural powers were concentrated in certain costumes and associated abstract notions of space, color, and animal disguises. Humans and inanimate objects adorned with teotl regalia became teixiptla, "containers," imbued with supernatural power and they played a special role in the community and the ritual performances. Warriors and priests coveted them as trophies and the pochteca viewed them as investments in their quest for status. The nobility used them as political tools in order to re-assert their power in the eyes of the common people. The commoners revered them as beings nourishing the teotls and indirectly sustaining the Cosmos. The sacrifice of the teixiptla was the climax act in a dual ritual of religious rites for agricultural success tied directly into the promotion of warfare politics and elite rule. Food symbolism was central to Aztec ritual and the killing of impersonators. Food sources were a great concern in their society. The population was fast exhausting the farming

capacity of the valley and they were becoming more dependent on tribute from conquered city-states. Ultimately, the deity impersonator was the transformer of supernatural power and the mediator between the ruling and the commoner class. He was, indeed, a "precious teotl."

## ENDNOTES

1. A passage from Fray Bernardino de Sahagun's description of the feast of Tlacaxipeualiztli. It was translated by Edward Seler in his work, Altmexikanische Studien, 1899.
2. Fasting in Mexica society consisted of only having one meal a day, at noon, without condiments, abstaining from sex, and no bathing (Nicholson, 1971).
3. Teixiptla is the prefixed form of Ixiptla-tli, which means 'an ixiptla-tli of somebody' or 'somebody's ixiptla-tli' (Hvidtfeldt, 1958).
4. Tzoalli is a dough made of corn flour, crushed amaranth seeds, and honey. It was considered a sacred food and drinking water was forbidden after eating it. (Duran, 1971).
5. The New Fire Ceremony was a ritual performed every fifty-two years atop the Mountain of the Star. The fire priests dressed as the four Tezcatlipocas and they rekindled a flame on the breast of a sacrificial victim. It symbolically started the next calendrical cycle (Duran, 1971).
6. Before giving special banquets, Aztec citizens would summon a diviner known as Ixtlilton, "Little Black Face." He would place a container of pulque, "black

water," with a mirror on the inside of the lid.

After the banquet, he returned to see if dust had collected on the mirror. If so, it was an ill omen for the host. Regardless of the outcome, the diviner was given a mantle "to cover his face" so no one would know what the host was up to.

7. The vessel used for the hearts given to Huitzilopochtli was called the "eagle vessel" and the one for Tlaloc, was the "cloud vessel."
8. The Tlaxcalan people were long time enemies of the Mexica. They were never subdued.
9. In myth, the Sun and the Moon were created through the self-sacrifice of two teotls, a poor one and a rich one. Each was to throw himself into a sacred bonfire, in the presence of all the other teotls. The rich teotl was to go first, but he hesitated in fear. The poor teotl took the opportunity to jump ahead and he then became the Sun. The rich teotl, upon seeing the poor one go ahead, quickly followed after his predecessor, thus becoming the Moon (Sahagun, 1981).

## ILLUSTRATIONS



30. Ochpaniztli (Chapter 30)  
 31-32. Panquetzaliztli (Chapter 34)  
 33. Tititl (Chapter 36)  
 34. Izcalli (Chapter 37)  
 35-36. Ixcoyauhqui (Chapter 38)

—After I'ato y Troncoso



15-21. Toxcatl (Chapter 24)

—Alter Pato y Troncos

Figure 2.



— After Poin y Tromson

Figure 3.  
 59. Tepan teuhoatzin (Appendix)  
 60. Tlenamacalitzli (Appendix)  
 61. Iouallapialitzli (Appendix)  
 62-63. Song of Xipe (Appendix)  
 64. Song of Chicome coatl (Appendix)  
 65. Song of the Totochtin (Appendix)  
 66. Song of Aclaua (Appendix)



*Hier. Paso y Trocena*

Figure 4.

- 52. Tlamictiliztli (Appendix)
- 53. Tlachpanaliztli (Appendix)
- 54. Tlauauanaliztli (Appendix)
- 55. Çacapan nemanaliztli (Appendix)
- 56. Neçacapechtamaliztli (Appendix)
- 57. Tlacuicouiliztli (Appendix)
- 58. Mexical tlamiztli (Appendix)

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