

AZTEC RELIGION: CREATION, SACRIFICE AND RENEWAL

During the sixteenth century, the Spanish colonizers of Mexico were both fascinated and horrified by the intensely religious life of the Aztec. A number of Spanish clerics were intrigued by apparent shared traits, such as the baptism of newborns, oral confession and the communion-like consumption of god images fashioned from seed. In addition, the early chroniclers wrote approvingly of the strict religious training of children, including the school for elite youths, the *calmecac*. In fact, the Franciscan Colegio de Santa Cruz in Tlatelolco, devoted to the schooling of native children was based conceptually on this institution. There were, nonetheless, many Aztec traditions that were antithetical to Spanish religious perceptions, including necromancy and the worship of multifarious deities and their graven images. The sixteenth century chroniclers were especially concerned with human sacrifice, which they often described in explicit detail. The early colonial *Codex Magliabechiano* and the *Codex Tudela* portray gruesome images of "*el diablo*" -- the netherworld death god, Mictlantecuhtli -- doused with buckets of human blood (fig. 1). Clearly, such descriptions and illustrations of human sacrifice were used to justify both the Spanish Conquest and suppression of native religious traditions. Nonetheless, human sacrifice was an important component of Aztec religion, not only as a ritual offering, but also in terms of creation mythology and how they saw themselves in relation to the surrounding world.¹

It is somewhat ironic that many of the sixteenth-century chroniclers who

vilified Aztec religious practices also provide us with detailed perceptions of the Aztec world view, or *cosmovision*, including some of the underlying reasons for human sacrifice. Two works probably based on the early research of the Franciscan Olmos, the *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* and the *Histoyre du Mechique* contain detailed accounts of Aztec creation mythology.² The studies by Fray Bernardino de Sahagun, especially the *Primeros Memoriales* and the *Florentine Codex* are unparalleled sources of information concerning Aztec ritual and mythology.³ Aside from the sixteenth century colonial manuscripts, pre-Hispanic Aztec sculpture offers a wealth of vivid material pertaining to gods, ritual and creation mythology. Although painted in the early colonial period, the magnificent *Codex Borbonicus* is rendered in essentially pure Aztec style, and contains detailed portrayals of deities and the ritual calendar, including the new fire ceremony performed once every 52 years. In addition, the Borgia Group of pre-Hispanic screenfolds, comprising the Borgia, Vaticanus B, Cospi, Laud and Fejervary-Mayer codices, illustrate gods and rites known for the Aztecs, although not painted in the imperial Aztec style found in the *Codex Borbonicus*. In addition, particular Aztec deities, such as the maize goddess Chicomecoatl and their tutelary god Huitzilpochtli, are entirely missing from these five manuscripts.

Numerous aspects of Aztec religion are innovative and unique, but the Aztec were also entirely part of the broader traditions of Mesoamerica. Certain Aztec religious traditions, both general and specific, occur among other ancient as well as contemporary cultures of Mesoamerica. Although the Classic Maya (ca. a.d.

250-900) possessed an art style strikingly distinct from that of the Aztec, many traits of their religion, including calendrics, ritual and mythology can be compared to that of the Classic Maya. Nonetheless, Teotihuacan is the Classic period culture that most directly relates to Aztec traditions. Located some sixty miles north of the later Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, Teotihuacan exerted a powerful influence over much of Mesoamerica during the Early Classic period (ca. a.d. 250-600), including the Zapotec and Maya regions as well as peoples of Central Mexico. Aztec art and architecture frequently displays clear evocations of the earlier ancient style of Teotihuacan. In addition, certain Aztec gods, including the plumed serpent Quetzalcoatl, the rain god Tlaloc, and the old fire god known as Huehuetēotl can be traced to Teotihuacan (**CAT #S 89, 93, 96, 100-1**). According to Aztec mythology, Teotihuacan not only was the place where the present world began, but was also the canonical source of many Aztec beliefs and ritual practices, including heart sacrifice, sacred bundles and the origin of music.

A basic concept underlying Aztec religious thought is dualism, including such binary oppositions as life and death, male and female, light and dark and fire and water. The Aztec supreme god was Omēteotl, a male and female god of duality who resided in the uppermost heaven of Omeyocan. These dualistic⁴ principles were by no means static, and actively interacted in complementary opposition. In Aztec thought, creation derived from this dynamic tension as the ultimate and continually abiding source of creation. One Aztec cosmogonic myth describes the birth of four original gods from Tonacatecuhtli and Tonacacihuatl --

male and female aspects of Ometeotl.⁵ In Aztec manuscripts and the Borgia Group, the primordial human couple are beneath a blanket to denote the original act of conception. Aside from human copulation, another metaphor for this dynamic interaction of creation was war -- cosmic battles created through supreme effort and sacrifice. The making of the ordered world out of primordial chaos was an inherently heroic and courageous act. In the same manner, Aztec warriors gave their lives not only for the growth of the Aztec state but for the continuity of this created cosmos.

In Aztec mythology, the origin of the heavens and earth is often portrayed as a cosmic battle between a pair of gods, Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl. Together, these two beings represent the concept of complementary opposition. Tezcatlipoca, Smoking Mirror, is the fateful god of conflict, darkness, and the solid but shifting earth (CAT # 232-34, 236). However, Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent, is a celestial being of the dawning east and the ethereal but also eternal life force symbolized by breath and wind (CAT # 241-42, 244). In his remarkable painting *Duality*, Rufino Tamayo vividly portrays this complementary opposition with the plumed serpent Quetzalcoatl and a jaguar Tezcatlipoca locked in battle as opposing forces of day and night (fig. 2).⁶

In the Aztec creation cycle known as the myth of the five suns, the making and destruction of four previous worlds occurs in terms of an ongoing cosmic war between Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl (CAT # 122).⁷ As symbols of the complementary forces of creation, however, this divine pair also act as allies,

much like the hero twins of ancient Mayan creation mythology.⁸ In one important Aztec creation episode, Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl do battle against a monstrous being floating on the primordial sea.⁹ Known as Cipactli, this creature is a fish-like crocodile with devouring mouths on its joints (**CAT # 138-40**).

Transforming themselves into serpents, Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl tear Cipactli in half, one part of the body forming the earth and the other, the sky. From the body of the earth deity, Tlaltecuhltli, the natural world flowered, the eyes forming pools and springs, the mouth, rivers and caves, and from flowing hair grew trees and blossoming plants.¹⁰ To placate the violated earth, humans must nourish Tlaltecuhltli with their own bodies hearts and blood. As noted by contemporary Nahua -- close descendants of the ancient Aztec: "We eat of the earth then the earth eats us."¹¹

In Aztec thought, the created universe has three realms. The uppermost is the sky, composed of thirteen levels occupied by particular gods and celestial phenomenon, including the sun, stars, and wind. This is the afterlife abode of valiant warriors and women who died in childbirth, individuals who live in the brilliant, celestial paradise of the sun, Tonatiuh Ilhuican. The lowest realm is the nine-leveled underworld, Mictlan, ruled by the crafty death god, Mictlantecuhltli and his consort, Mictlancihuatl. Unfortunate souls who succumbed from sickness or old age went to this dark and dusty region from which there is no return. However, another netherworld region is Tlalocan, paradise of the rain god Tlaloc. Here people who died by drowning or were struck by lightning live amidst

abundant food and vast riches.¹²

Between the underworld and sky lies the surface of the earth, Tlalticpac, the place of the living. The act of creation divided the world into four quarters, each with its own symbolic tree. At the center stands a fifth tree, the pivotal *axis mundi* offering access to both sky and underworld. The Middle Formative Olmec, the Classic Maya and the Aztec often portrayed the Middle Place as maize, much as if the four-cornered world constituted a symbolic corn field.¹³ An Aztec stone box from Tizapan contains a central, greenstone image of the Aztec maize goddess, Chicomecoatl, with four other deities painted on the underside of the capping lid (CAT. # 136-7). Painted in red, black, yellow and white, these four beings are directional aspects of Tlaloc, the god of rain and lightning.

Aztec and other Mesoamerican rain gods are commonly quadripartite, demarcating specific rains of the four directions. According to the *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas*, Tlaloc had four water basins with specific types of rain, some beneficial and others famine-producing.¹⁴ Pages 27 and 28 of the *Codex Borgia* both portray a central Tlaloc surrounded by four other Tlalocs, or Tlaloque, of the world quarters dispensing either life-giving or destructive rain. The four Tlaloque were also identified with directional mountains, hills and peaks being the dwelling place of the rain gods and the source of water and abundance. Among the Aztec, the most important mountain pertaining to the rain god was Mount Tlaloc, or Tlalocan, located east of Tenochtitlan. According to the Dominican cleric Fray Diego Duran, a square stone enclosure atop the summit

contained a central image of Mount Tlaloc surrounded by lesser mountains.¹⁵

Archaeological reconnaissance by Felipe Solis Olguin and Richard Townsend documented a series of boulders surrounding a shrine within the enclosure. Along with two stones on the eastern and western sides, there were four others at the corners and one in the center. Richard Townsend notes that this plan is very similar to the organization described for the *Codex Borgia*, a central Tlaloc¹⁶ surrounded by with four others at the corners. In the *Primeros Memoriales* scene of the sacrificial debt-payments of children to Tlaloc during the *veintena* month of Atlcahualo, a victim lies in a stone enclosure atop a hill (fig. 3). Behind the head of the victim, three mountain gods, the *tepictoton*, are spaced regularly on three sides of the enclosure, and quite possibly this scene refers to Mount Tlaloc and its shrine of directional mountains.¹⁷

In one version of the Cipactli myth, the creation of the earth occurred on the first day of the first year.¹⁸ The origin of the world encompassed the creation of the calendar – the integration and organization of time and space. One of the most complex portrayals of this cosmological ordering appears on page 1 of the Fejervary-Mayer codex (fig. 4). In this scene, the quadripartite universe is shown with world trees placed at both the four sides and corners of the quartered world. The creation of this ordered space is again the result of cosmic battle and sacrifice.¹⁹ At the outer edges of this plan are the dismembered remains of Tezcatlipoca, the powerful deity embodying conflict and change in the universe.²⁰ Beginning in a counterclockwise motion with the eastern tree at the top of the

scene, the body parts of Tezcatlipoca lie to the left of each tree, beginning with an arm, a leg, the torso and finally, his head. Gouts of blood from these four quarters fall to the central warrior figure, Xiuhtecuhtli, god of time and the pivotal world center.²¹ As in the myth of Tlaltecuhltli, the creation of the ordered world is in terms of sacrifice and dismemberment, here with the severed body of Tezcatlipoca cast to the four corners of the world.

Aside from illustrating the cosmos, Fejervary-Mayer page 1 portrays the combination of two calendrical systems, the 260-day and 365-day years (fig. 4). The eight-lobed band framing the eight world trees denotes the 260-day divinatory calendar combining twenty day names with the numbers one to thirteen. Each of the twenty day names has a specific god and its own cardinal direction, with the days running in a continuously counterclockwise motion to the east, north, west and south. The repeating series of thirteen numbers divides the 260-day calendar into 20 thirteen day *trecena* "weeks," each named by the number 1 – the first numerical position in a *trecena* -- along with a specific day name having its own god and directional orientation. In addition, a given *trecena* was presided by pair of gods as well as another deity and associated bird identified with each of the thirteen day positions of the *trecena* and, in addition, an independent sequence of nine deities. Clearly, this was a calendar of extraordinary complexity, the combinations of gods, numbers and directions providing nuanced and subtle auguries for the days.

Whereas the 260-day calendar frequently pertained to the private affairs of

individuals, such as personal well-being, the outcome of business ventures, or the compatibility of particular spouses, there was another calendar of 365-days that expressed through human sacrifice, drama and pageantry the cosmic processes of the sun, seasons and the primordial doings of the gods. Since this calendar concerned the vague solar year, many of the deities evoked were beings of agricultural fertility, including maize, the earth, and water. The 365-day day calendar was composed of eighteen months twenty 20 days, often referred to as *veintenas*, and five extra days, the *nemontemi*. During *veintena* celebrations, particular deities were often portrayed through deity impersonators. One of the most striking examples of deity impersonation occurred during the *veintena* month of Tlacaxipehualiztli, during with devotees of the flayed god, Xipe Totec, would don the skins of sacrificial victims (CAT # 221-31). Temporary embodiments of the gods, deity impersonators were frequently sacrificed, thereby releasing the divine spirit so that it could be renewed the following year.²²

Aside from timing the annual rites and celebrations of the solar year, the 365-day calendar served as the basis for Aztec historical annals, each year named by the thirteen numbers and of four of the twenty day names of the 260-day cycle. These four day names each had its own directional association, Acatl (Reed) for the east, Tecpatl (Flint) north, Calli (House) west and finally Tochtli (Rabbit) for the south. Known as year bearers, these day names combined with the thirteen numbers of the 260-day calendar to name the 365-day years. The year bearers can be seen as the inwardly facing, descending birds at the corners of Fejervary-

Mayer page 1 (fig. 4). The combination of four year bearers and thirteen numbers created the 52-year cycle of distinctly named, 365-day years, much as if all of the four birds in the Fejervary-Mayer scene had spun around the central axis thirteen times.

Far more than simply marking the succession of years, the Aztec year bearers concern basic concepts of Aztec creation and cosmology, as each is identified with a directional god and tree which supports the sky.²³ As with other Mesoamerican peoples, the Aztec considered both spans of time and public offices as *cargos*, heavy burdens to be supported and carried. Although the Aztec sky bearers had the weighty responsibility of supporting the firmament, they could transform into fierce star demons, the *tzitzimime*, during periods of darkness, such as solar eclipses. The *tzitzimime* can appear as spiders hanging downward from the sky or as skeletal beings with sharp talons (fig. 5a-b). In one Aztec scene a *tzitzimime* shambles in the starry night sky towards the sun god, Tonatiuh (fig. 5b).²⁴ This menacing being recalls the upper portion of the Bilimek Pulque Vessel, which portrays two figures with wooden clubs and stones flanking and attacking a partially eclipsed sun (fig. 5c).

For the Aztec, an especially feared calendrical event was the completion of the 52-year cycle, occurring in the *veintena* month of Panquetzalli during the year 2 Acatl. The Aztec termed this momentous ceremony *toxihmolpia*, meaning the "binding of the years." The termination of the 52-year cycle appears in Aztec stone sculpture in the form of *xiuhmolpilli* wood bundles, each stick symbolically

corresponding to a completed year (CAT # 335). Although the binding surely alludes to the tying up of sticks, it probably has other meanings, including the making a package to carry as a burden, and the bundling of the "dead" calendrical cycle.²⁵ Just as the bound and shrouded dead were cremated, wood bundles were cast into a hearth at the Temple of Darkness to create the world anew. The central to the *toxiuhmolpia* rites was the renewal of the cosmos through the making of new fire, an act expressed in terms of a cosmic battle, the forces of darkness and night versus the resplendant sun. In preparation, all fires in the city of Tenochtitlan were extinguished, with the hearthstones, ceramic vessels and other old objects of the household discarded and replaced. At night, the inhabitants of the city waited anxiously for new fire to be made on the chest of a victim atop Cerro Huixachtepetl, located to the southeast. If new fire was not created, the world would be destroyed by the *tzitzimime* star demons:

Thus was it said: it was claimed that if fire could not be drawn, then [the sun] would be destroyed forever; all would be ended; there would evermore be night. Nevermore would the sun come out. Night would prevail forever, and the demons of darkness would descend to eat men.²⁶

During this terrifying night, the primordial battle of creation began anew.

As part of the nocturnal new fire ceremonies, the fire priests impersonated the gods as they proceeded to Cerro Huixachtepetl, and the *Codex Borbonicus* illustrates a priest dressed as Quetzalcoatl leading these godly beings to the pyre at the House of Darkness. The nocturnal meeting of the gods recalls the mythical creation of the fifth and present sun at Teotihuacan.²⁷ Following the

aforementioned destruction of the four previous worlds, the gods convened at Teotihuacan to light the world anew. By throwing himself into a great pyre, the humble Nanahuatzin became the sun god, Tonatiuh. Since the haughty but also timid god Tecuciztecatl hesitated he became the weaker moon. Out of this fire also emerged the eagle and jaguar, symbols of the sun and the famed Aztec eagle and jaguar military orders. From the flames was born the code of the courageous warrior, one who freely dies for the empire and the sun. However, the act of self-sacrifice did not end with the sun and moon at Teotihuacan. When the sun first rose in the east, it did not move and follow its path through the sky. To ensure the creation of this present world, the gods sacrificed themselves and offered their hearts to the sun. From their mantles and other remains, the priests of the god fashioned sacred bundles, the *tlaquimilolli*.²⁸

The Aztec account of the first dawning at Teotihuacan denotes a basic shift in existence, from the mythic time of the gods to the present world of historical reality, in contrast to the mythic time of gods.²⁹ As can be seen in their sacred mortuary bundles and stone images, the gods remain silent and immobile. Much like honored ancestors, the gods are invoked by incense, music and sacrificial offerings. The clothing and other articles in the *tlaquimilolli* bundles of the dead gods, concern deity impersonation, an important means by which the deities are manifested temporarily in the world of mortals. Elizabeth Boone notes the close relation of the inert god bundle to the *teixiptla*, the "image" or physical manifestation of the god.³⁰ The Aztec term *teixiptla* also refers to god

impersonators, that is, those who wear the mantles and other raiments contained in the *tlaquimilolli* bundles. The myth suggests that along with the making of god bundles, the Aztec institution of heart sacrifice began at Teotihuacan, and in fact, the ancient art of Teotihuacan contains the first widespread portrayals of sacrificial hearts in Mesoamerica (CAT # 98)³¹. Moreover, Teotihuacan art and writing portray eagles and jaguars devouring human hearts, a convention also known in Postclassic Central Mexico (CAT # 118-9).

The Aztecs replicated the original sacrifice of the gods with the ritual offering of human hearts to the sun. Such hearts were placed in stone sacrificial basins known as *cuauhxicalli*, meaning "eagle gourd bowl" (CAT # 322). These vessel are ornamented with portrayals of eagle plumes and human hearts, with an image of the earth deity, Tlaltecuhltli, carved on the base. The interior of *cuauhxicalli* display a central sign, the glyph Nahui Ollin -- the calendrical name of the sun god, Tonatiuh (CAT # 123-26, 134). Just as the gods presented their hearts to the sun at Teotihuacan, the Aztec placed the bleeding hearts atop the solar image to revive the dawning sun. Among the contemporary Huichol of Nayarit, there are the *xukuri*, gourd bowls that in both form and function closely resemble Aztec *cuauhxicalli*³². Along with being used to present sacrificial blood to the gods, the Huichol vessels often display central images of the sun in their interior. The *xukuri* symbolically concerns water, women and the earth. In one Huichol myth, the womb of the underworld is a blood-filled *xukuri*³³. Mention has been made of the image of Tlaltecuhltli floating on the underside of *cuauhxicalli*

vessels. It is likely that *cuauhxicalli* and birth canal of the earth, the place from where the sun is daily born. Page 32 of the *Codex Borgia* portrays a birthing flint figure in the squatting position of Tlaltecuhltli, with its hips clearly being a sacrificial basin lined with flints (fig. 6a). In fact, the skirt worn by Tlaltecuhltli frequently resembles a basin, much as if her hips constitute a bowl or bucket (fig. 6b). Along with the Aztec and Huichol, the Classic Maya also had sacrificial bowls marked with solar images in the interior, here as the four-lobed *k'in* glyph, the Maya sun sign. In Classic Maya art, such bowls commonly appear as censers containing hearts and other sacrificial offerings. One incised earspool portrays a Maya cosmic monster in the same crouching position found with the later Aztec Tlaltecuhltli (fig. 6c). In the hip creation of the creature, there is the solar sacrificial bowl (fig. 6d). As with the Aztec *cuauhxicalli*, this Classic Maya bowl also denotes the womb from which the sun emerges.³⁴

The sacrificial birth of Tonatiuh at Teotihuacan was a myth shared by many peoples of highland Mexico. However, there is another creation account that is wholly Aztec and refers to what was then a still ongoing process, the hegemonic expansion of the Aztec state. The principal characters in this myth are wholly Aztec and have no obvious precursors in the art and ideology of central Mexico. The fierce and bellicose Huitzilopochtli, Hummingbird on the Left, constitutes the preeminent character and served as a solar, tutelary god of the Aztec and their empire. Also known as the Blue Tezcatlipoca, Huitzilopochtli embodied conflict, strife and the fate of the Aztec people. Huitzilopochtli was magically conceived

while his mother, Coatlicue, meaning Serpent Skirt, was sweeping in her temple. Finding her mother pregnant, the previously born children of Coatlicue, Coyolxauhqui and her four hundred brothers, the Centzon Huitznahua, became enraged and prepared for battle. However, at his birth Huitzilopochtli emerged fully armed and slew his older siblings at Serpent Mountain, or Coatepec.

Long ago, Eduard Seler suggested that the mythic battle at Coatepec symbolized the dawning of the sun out of the female earth and the defeat of beings of night and darkness, with Coyolxauhqui being the moon and the Centzon Huitznahua, the innumerable stars.³⁵ Although the meaning of this episode remains obscure, the 1978 discovery of the Coyolxauhqui monument at the Templo Mayor revealed its central importance in Aztec ideology. Located at the base of the Huitzilopochtli side of the Templo Mayor, the monument features Coyolxauhqui stripped and dismembered, her head and limbs severed from the torso. Clearly, this monument portrays her defeat at the Coatepec, where she tumbled in pieces down the hill. Due to the discovery of this major monument, it is evident that the sacrifice of captives atop the Huitzilopochtli side of the Templo Mayor reenacted the defeat of Coyolxauhqui and her brothers. Just as the mythic enemies of Huitzilopochtli were slain at Coatepec, captives from enemy states were sacrificed and cast down the temple steps.

Directly below the Coyolxauhqui stone lies an earlier version of the defeated goddess rendered in sculpted stucco. As in the case of the stone monument, she is nude and dismembered, her head and limbs cut from the central trunk.³⁶

However, the stucco example portrays the severed limbs well away from the torso and oriented to the four world quarters, recalling both the Tlaltecuhltli myth and the sacrifice of Tezcatlipoca appearing on page 1 of the *Codex Fejervary-Mayer* (see fig. 4). Whatever her original identity, in death Coyolxauhqui is rendered as the earth, dismembered and fashioned into a new ordered world. The birth of Huiztilopochtli concerns both the creation of the Aztec sun and its earthly domain. From the dismembered Coyolxauhqui and the bodies of vanquished enemies the Aztec world was made.

The symbolic *axis mundi* of the Aztec, the Templo Mayor and the dismembered body of Coyolxauhqui was at the center of four quarters that divided not only the city of Tenochtitlan but the entire Aztec world as well. The Templo Mayor supported two temples, the southern structure dedicated to Huitzilopochtli and that to the north to Tlaloc, the ancient god of rain, agriculture and the four directions. This dual temple has been interpreted in a number of ways, including the importance of both agriculture and war, the contrast of ancient traditions to the new Aztec world, and as a merging of two distinct mountains, Coatepec and a mountain of sustenance dedicated to Tlaloc.³⁷ However, whereas Coatepec relates to the earth's surface and the historical doings of the Aztec, the mountain of Tlaloc concerns the interior of the mountain and the ancient paradise of Tlalocan. One of the later stages of the Templo Mayor featured an altar with steep steps centered at the base of the Tlaloc temple. Topped by a pair frogs, this altar recalls a description of Tlalocan in the *Primeros Memoriales*. According to this source, a

pair of frogs sat atop a wall to mark the entrance to Tlalocan. The frog altar may represent a symbolic entrance to Tlalocan, a realm located in the interior of the Templo Mayor. Many of the rich offerings buried with both sides of the Templo Mayor may well refer this paradisaical place of wealth and plenty. In addition, as earlier phases of the Templo Mayor were buried by subsequent construction, they may have also been identified with the realm of Tlaloc and the ancestral past.

Aside from sacrificial offerings, music was an essential Aztec means of contacting the gods and ancestors. Guilhem Olivier notes that with wind instruments, such as conch trumpets and flutes, the gods were ritually attracted and compelled.³⁹ According to Fray Geronimo de Mendieta, the original priests of the *tlaquimilolli* bundles sought music to conjure and communicate with the gods after their mass sacrifice at Teotihuacan.⁴⁰ In two related accounts of this mythic origin of music, a priest of Tezcatlipoca or the wind travels across the sea to the house of the sun to obtain music.⁴¹ A version of this episode appears on pages 35 to 38 of the *Codex Borgia*.⁴² On page 35, Tezcatlipoca and the wind god, Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl obtain a bundle from a temple occupied by figure displaying both attributes of Tonatiuh and Tlaloc. The following page 36 depicts a great stream of wind exiting a red flute in the center of this bundle, with the very same flute being played by the god of music, Xochipilli, on page 37 (fig. 6a-b). Within the stream of wind appear items related to music and dance, including drums of ceramic and turtle shell, flutes, dance staffs as well as precious birds and flowers. In addition, there are five repetitive images of Quetzalcoatl flying with his eyes shut, either

denoting death or more likely ecstatic trance, such as could be achieved through music and dance (fig. 7c).

The flight of Quetzalcoatl in the *Codex Borgia* scene corresponds well with Aztec concepts of music and conjuring and ancestral souls. According to John Bierhorst, the early colonial *Cantares Mexicanos* concerns the conjuring of⁴³ revenants who descend as birds from the heavens. At times, Aztec *teponaztli*⁴⁴ drums portray flying individuals similar to the Borgia figure. An excellent example also occurs on Aztec ceramic model of a *teponaztli* (see CAT # 282). Although this object is not a true *teponaztli*, it is probably still a ceramic drum, with the open mouth originally covered with a skin tympanum. The drum's surface portrays Xochipilli flying in a position almost identical to the Quetzalcoatl figures in the Borgia stream of music (fig. 7d). In addition, both wear the same dance collar of shell tinklers, flowers, birds and musical instruments. An actual *teponaztli* depicts a similarly flying figure in a band containing flowers and a tropical bird, elements also appearing in the Borgia stream of music (fig. 7e). Whereas the central scene on one side of this drum portrays the sun engaged in celestial battle, the other side depicts the eagle and jaguar, symbols of the Aztec military orders dedicated to the sun. Bierhorst notes that a central theme of the *Cantares Mexicanos* is the summoning of warrior souls from the flower paradise of the sun. In Aztec thought, this celestial realm was closely identified with Teotihuacan, the mythic birthplace⁴⁵ of the sun and eagle and jaguar military orders.

CONCLUSIONS:

The Aztec were very aware of their historical past, and many aspects of their religious traditions relate mythically to the creation of the present sun at Teotihuacan. Although this episode clearly concerns Aztec militarism and the solar war cult, it also relates to the practice of heart sacrifice, the first making of sacred bundles, and the origin of music. Aside from the sun, the earth was also created through sacrifice, with the cosmos created through the dismemberment of the primordial Cipactli. The birth of Huiztilpochtli also concerned human sacrifice, and it is likely that this wholly Aztec myth concerned both the origin of the sun and their terrestrial realm. For the act of heart sacrifice, four priests held the limbs of the victim, thereby creating a cosmogram of the four quarters with the victim's heart at the center. In fact, in sixteenth century Yucatan, the four priests who grasped the limbs were referred to as *chakoob*, the four directional rain gods of the Maya. During Aztec rites of sacrifice, conch trumpets and other instruments were played to mark the numinous period of contact with the deities. To the Aztec, human sacrifice was anything but a mundane event, it was an act that restored the violence of creation, opening a doorway into the original world of the gods.

1 For a recent discussion of Aztec sacrifice, see David Carrasco *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and The Role of Violence in Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press 1999).

2 Angel Garibay *Teogonia e historia de los Mexicanos: Tres opusculos del siglo XVI* (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa 1979).

3 Sahagun

4 The *Histoyre du Mechiue* explicitly describes this deity and his and her realm: "In the thirteenth and last [heaven], the highest, there is a god called Ometecuhtli, which means two gods, and one is a goddess (Garibay 1979: 103, trans. by author). For Aztec concepts of dualism, see Leon-Portilla 1963; Lopez Austin 1980.

5 Garibay *ibid.* 23)

6 Although not discovered until 1975, over ten years after Tamayo painted *Duality*, the portico murals of Structure A at Late Classic Cacaxtla feature the same dualistic opposition. Whereas the eagle Maya warrior of the east stands upon a plumed serpent, the Mexican jaguar warrior of the west is atop a jaguar serpent. Thus in these murals, there is a plumed serpent of the dawning east and a jaguar serpent of the nocturnal west.

7 For accounts of the five suns myth, see Morena de los Arcos 1967; Nicholson 1971: 398-99; Taube 1993: 33-36).

8 For the Maya hero twins, see Coe 1989; Taube 1993 ; Tedlock 1996

9 These accounts appear in the *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* and the *Histoyre du Mechiue* (Garibay op cit.: 26, 105, 108),

10 The creation of the earth could be considered a form of cosmic rape, a combination of the two creation metaphors of copulation and violent conflict (see del Rio 1973: 587; Graulich 1983: 581).

11 This statement was recorded by Tim Knab from a contemporary Nahua informant of the Sierra de Puebla, cited in Broda

12 The *Primeros Mermoriales* contains a remarkably detailed description of a woman traveling to the netherworld realm of Tlalocan (Sahagun 1997: 179-83). Tim Knab has documented a form of this watery paradise, here known as Talocan, among the contemporary Nahua of the Sierra de Puebla. According to modern

belief, this realm occupies the center of the underworld (cited in Broda et al. 1987: 108).

13 For corn and cosmology in Mesoamerican thought see Taube (1996; 2000)

14 Tlaloc with four basins (Garibay 1979: 26) The four large cisterns oriented to the cardinal points atop Cerro Tetzcotzingo probably refer the rains of the four directions (see Townsend 1992: 137-40).

15 Duran, Mount Tlaloc (1971: 156)

16 Mount Tlaloc (Townsend 1991: 28)

17 Although the *Primeros Memoriales* and the *Florentine Codex* describe the mountain sacrifice of children to Tlaloc during the month of Atlcahualo, Duran mentions the child sacrifices upon Mount Tlaloc occurred during the later month of Ochpaniztli (Sahagun 1997: 55-56; 1959-82, bk. 2: 1-2, 42-44; Duran 1971: 425).

18 Cipactli myth and calendar (Garibay 1979: 105)

19 Since at least the first century a.d., the ancient Maya portrayed their day names surrounded by a cartouche denoting blood, much as if the days were sacrificed. David Stuart has determined that a text from the recently discovered Late Classic bench from Temple 19 at Palenque refers to the chopping of a mythical reptile, clearly a version of the Cipactli myth. In addition, versions of the Cipactli myth were also present in Late Postclassic Yucatan, see Taube 1992: 128-31).

20 In the colonial Nahuatl chants recorded by Ruiz de Alarcon, the surface of the earth is described as a "mirror that gives off smoke," a probable allusion to the smoking mirror of Tezatlipoca (see Coe and Whittaker 1982: 131, 304, Alarcon 1984: 95).

21 As Susan Gillespie notes, dismemberment is a common metaphor for creation of the universe and the division of the seasons in native New World mythologies. Susan Gillespie (1991: 33)

22 Impersonation and sacrifice (Carrasco 2000: 131)

23 for discussion of sky bearers, see Thompson 1934, Taube 1993)

24 In a drawing of this scene published by Hasso von Winning, the *tzitzimtl*

faces away from the sun. However, since this is a wrap-around image on a cylindrical bone, the figure can be read facing towards the sun. Given the basic, antagonistic nature of the *tzitzimime* against solar light, the latter seems the most likely interpretation.

25 For the mortuary symbolism of year bundles, see Caso 1967

26 New fire quote (Sahagun 1950-82, bk. 7: 27)

27 New fire and Teo creation myth (Taube 2000: 315-6)

28 Making of god bundles (Mendieta 1970: 78-9)

29 Similarly, in the sixteenth century *Popol Vuh* of the Quiche Maya, the gods and the spirits of animals were turned into stone at the first dawning of the sun (Tedlock 1996: 161).

30 Elizabeth Boone (1989: 29)

31 For the original identification of heart sacrifice in Teotihuacan art, see Sejourne 1956: 119-27.

32 For discussions of Huichol *xukuri*, see Lumholtz 1900: 161-66, Zingg 1938: 634-5, Neurath 2002: 175-6

33 Negrin 1975: 82-84

34 In this regard, it is also noteworthy that Classic Maya elite women are often portrayed wearing the sacrificial offering bowl as a headdress, denoting the relation of this vessel to women, see Taube 1998: 464.

35 Eduard Seler "Einiges über die natürlichen Grundlagen mexikanischer Mythen," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 39 (1907): 1-41.

36 Eduardo Matos Moctezuma "Las seis Coyolxauhqui: Variaciones sobre un mismo tema," *Estudios de Cultura Azteca* 21(1991): 15-30.

37 For a recent discussion of these interpretations of the Templo Mayor, see Carrasco, *ibid.*: 72.

38 Sahagun 1997: 181. I am indebted to Alan Robinson for mentioning to me similarity of the Templo Mayor altar to the *Primeros Memoriales* account.

39 Guilem Olivier "The Hidden King and the Broken Flutes: Mythical and Royal Dimensions of the Feast of Tezcatlipoca in Toxcatl" In *Representing Aztec Ritual: Performance, Text and Image in the Work of Sahagun* (Boulder: The University Press of Colorado 2002).

40 Mendieta *ibid*: 80. Excavations in the sacred precinct of Tenochtitlan also suggest that the Aztec related music to ancient Teotihuacan. Clearly evoking the architectural and mural style of Teotihuacan, the Red Temple structures at Tenochtitlan contained offerings of musical instruments, including miniature forms, see Bertina Olmedo Vera *Los templos rojos del recinto sagrado de Tenochtitlan* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia 2002) and Leonardo Lopez Lujan "The Aztecs' Search for the Past," in Eduardo Matos Moctezuma and Felipe Solís Olguin, curators, *Aztecs* (New York, Harry N. Abrams 2002).

41 Mendieta *ibid*; Garibay *ibid*." 111-12

42 Karl Taube "The Breath of Life: The Symbolism of Wind in Mesoamerica and the American Southwest,"

43 John Bierhorst *Cantares Mexicanos: Songs of the Aztecs* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1985), p. 19.

44 For examples of flying figures on *teponaztli*, see Marshall Saville *The Wood-Carvers Art in Ancient Mexico* (New York: Museum of the American Indian 1925), plate 33a-b.

45 In addition, it appears that the Aztec concepts of the flower paradise and the relation of warrior souls with birds and butterflies was already present at Teotihuacan, see Janet Berlo "The Warrior and the Butterfly: Central Mexican Ideologies of Sacred Warfare and Teotihuacan, in Janet Berlo, ed. *Text and Image in Pre-Columbian Art: Essays on the Interrelationship of the Visual and Verbal Arts*, pp. 70-117 (Oxford: BAR International Series 1983), and Karl Taube, "The Turquoise Hearth: Fire, Self-Sacrifice, and the Central Mexican Cult of War, in *Mesoamerica's Classic Heritage: From Teotihuacan to the Aztecs*, David Carrasco, Lindsay Jones and Scott Sessions, eds., pp. 269-340 (Boulder, University Press of Colorado, 2000).



Figure 1.— Aztec priests offering sacrificial blood to Mictlantecuhtli, *Codex Tudela*, fol. 76.

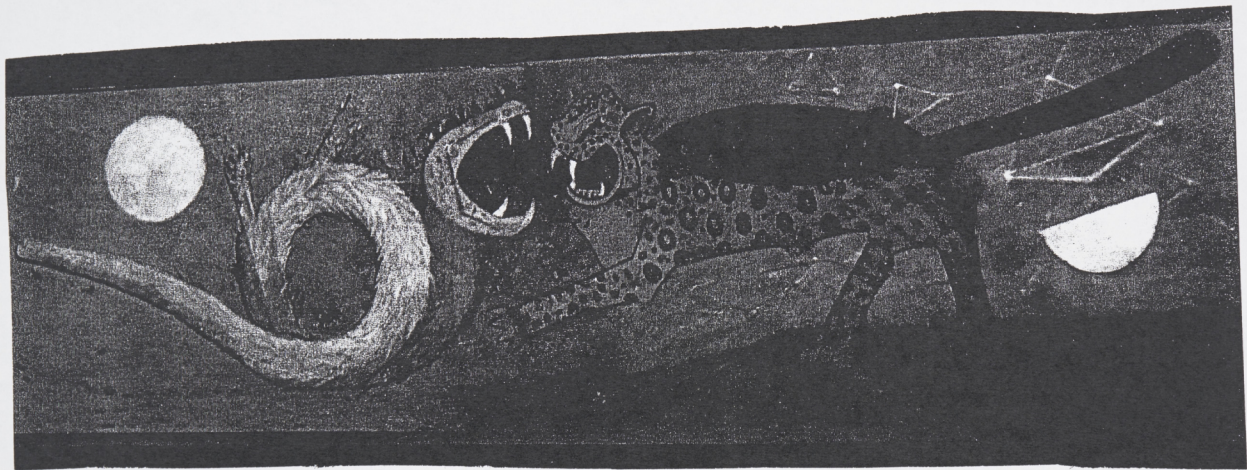


Figure 2. Painting by Rufino Tamayo entitled *Duality* (1963-64), Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City (from Genauer 1974: plate 23).



Figure 3.- A possible portrayal of human sacrifice atop Mount Tlaloc, *Primeros Memoriales*, fol. 250r.

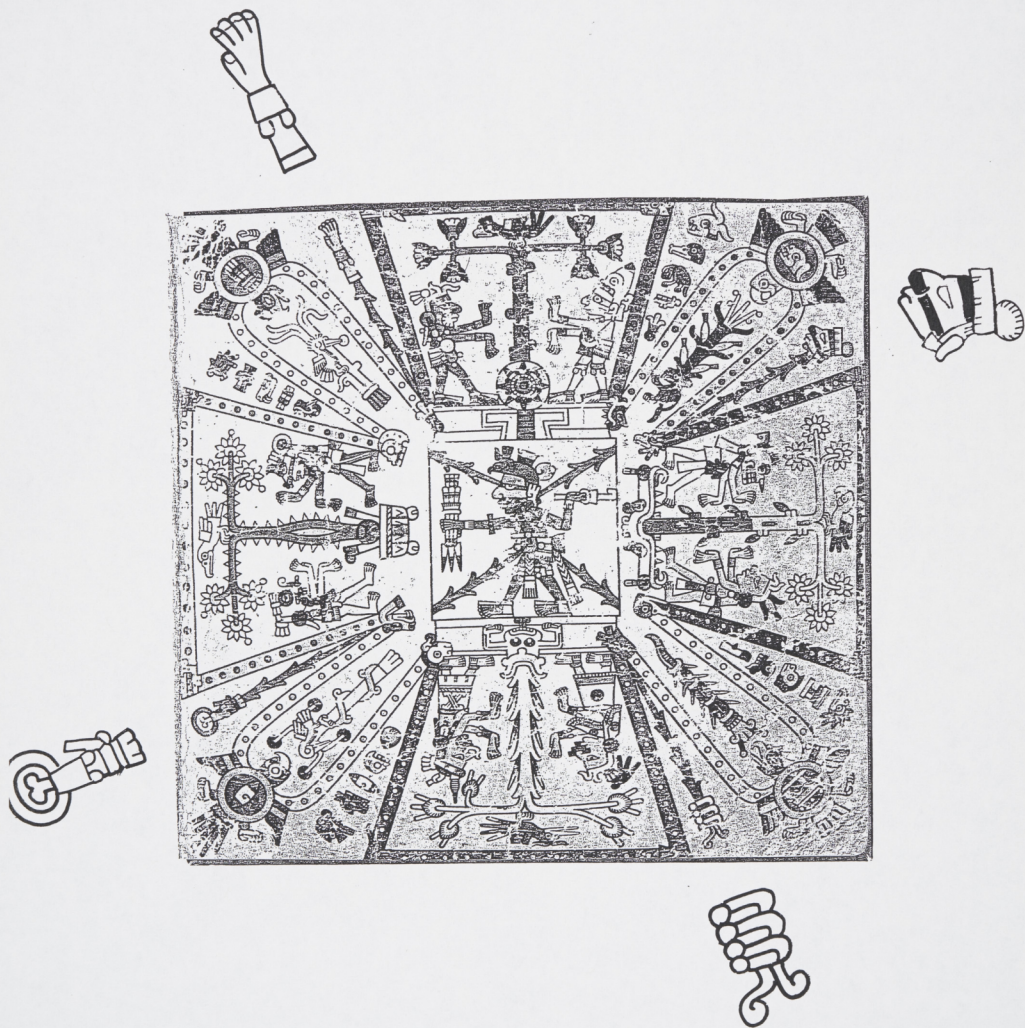
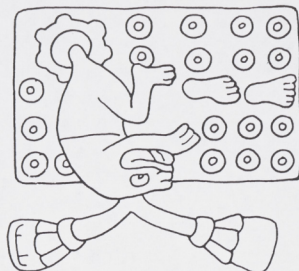
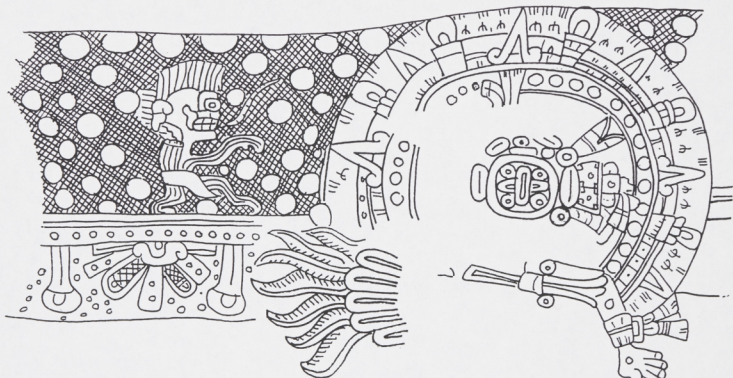


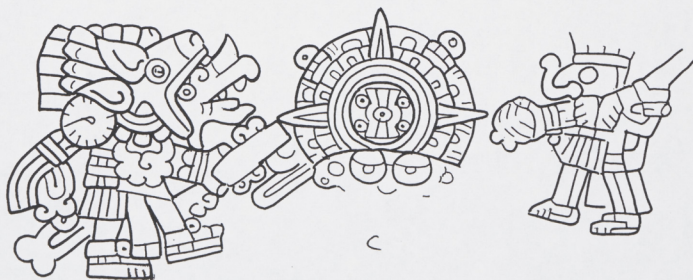
Figure 4.- Cosmology, calendrics and the dismemberment of Tezcatlipoca, note body of Tezcatlipoca cast to four world quarters, *Codex Fejervary-Mayer*, p. 1.



a



b



c

Figure 5.- The Aztec *tzitzimime* star demons of the night sky (drawings by author).

a) Portrayal of *tzitzimime* as spider in starry sky, detail of stone *xiuhmolpilli* bundle (after Moedano Koer 1951: fig. 1).

b) Depiction of *tzitzimime* in night sky with the sun, detail of carved human femur (after von Winning 1968 :plate 397).

c) Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl and pulque god attacking the sun with sticks and stones, detail of Bilimek Pulque vessel (after Taube 1993: fin. 3a)

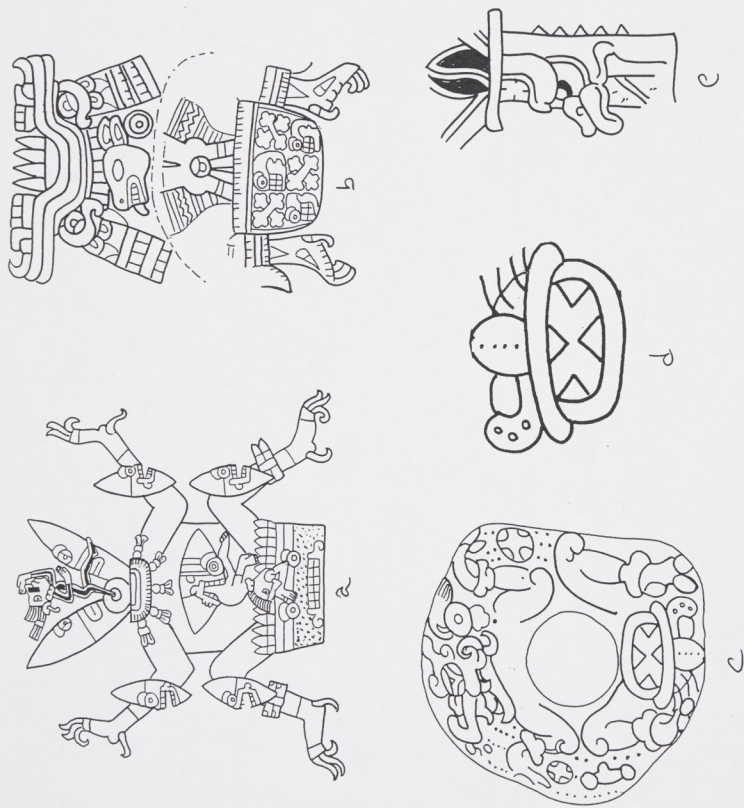


Figure 6.— Sacrificial bowls and the Aztec Cipactli.

- a) Flint figure in Tlaltecuhltli birth position with hips in form of sacrificial basin, *Codex Borgia*, p. 42.
- b) Tlaltecuhltli with skirt and hips resembling a bowl, detail of Bilimek Pulque Vessel.
- c) Early Classic Maya jade earspool portraying supernatural figure with offering bowl as hips.
- d) Detail of offering bowl
- e) Offering bowl censer with probable sacrificial heart, detail of Late Classic Maya vase.

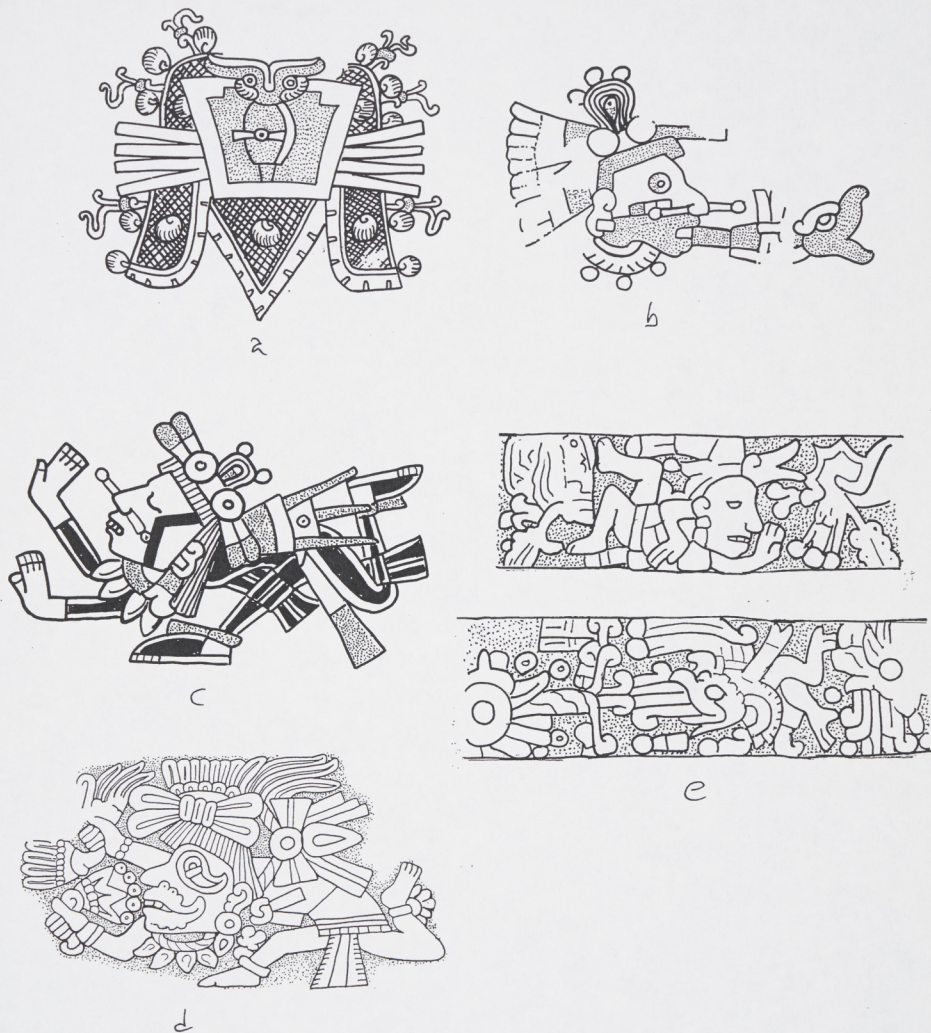


Figure 7. Late Postclassic portrayals of the origin and symbolism of music (drawings by author).

a) Sacred bundle containing red flute, *Codex Borgia* p. 36.

b) Xochipilli playing red flute, *Codex Borgia*, p. 37.

c) Quetzalcoatl flying in stream of music, *Codex Borgia*, p. 36.

d) Xochipilli in flying position, detail of Aztec ceramic drum.

e) Flying individual, bird and flowers, details of carved bands encircling ends of wooden *teponaztli* (after Saville 1925: plate 32).