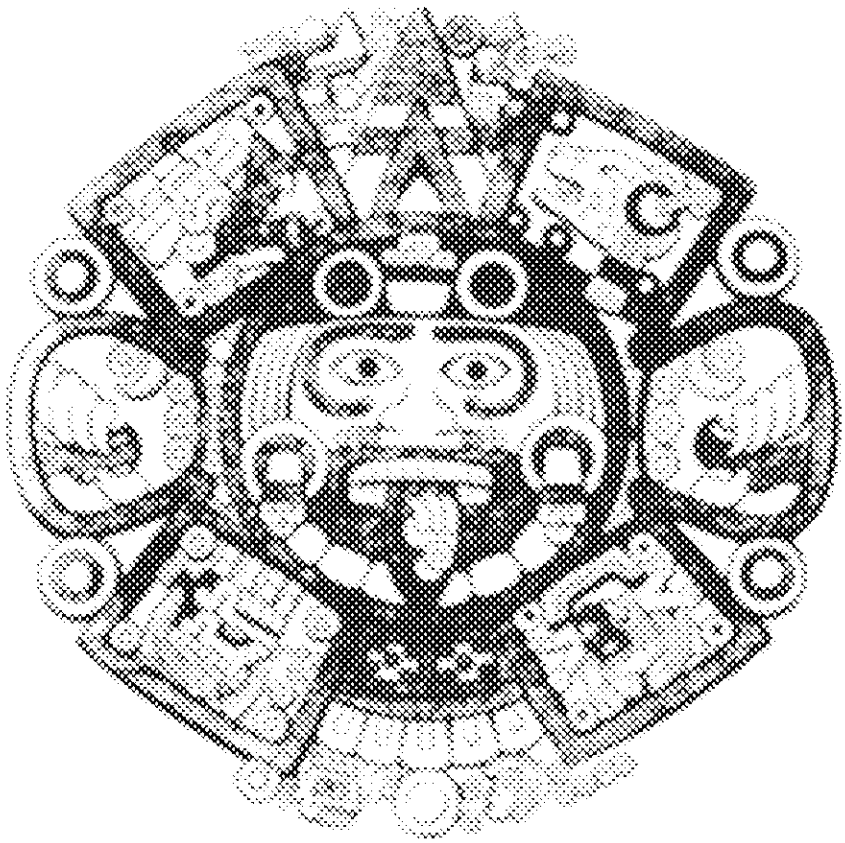

Tenochtitlan: The Public Culture of the Mexica State at the Time of Conquest

The Conquest of New Spain by Bernal Díaz serves as a fine introduction into the Spanish perspective of the defeat of the Mexica empire that dominated most of Anahuac, the lands that we know as central Mexico. Although Díaz wrote the volume years after conquest, it is filled with vivid images of this unique age. Through its pages we can recapture some sense of the reactions of the Spaniards as they first beheld the massive urban complex of Lake Texcoco, upon which was built the Mexica capital of Tenochtitlan. Díaz records that

> when we saw all those cities and villages built in the water, and other great towns on dry land, and that straight and level causeway leading to Mexico, we were astounded. These great towns and *cues* and buildings rising from the water, all made of stone, seemed like an enchanted vision from the tale of Amadís. Indeed, some of our soldiers asked whether it was not all a dream. It is not surprising therefore that I should write in this vein. It was all so wonderful that I do not know how to describe this first glimpse of things never heard, seen or dreamed of before.[33]

In the imperial gardens he recalled:

> I was never tired of noticing the diversity of trees and the various scents given off by each, and the paths choked with roses and other flowers, and the many local fruit-trees and rose-bushes, and the pond of fresh water. Another remarkable thing was that large canoes could come into the garden from the lake, through a channel they had cut, and their crews did not have to disembark. Everything was shining with lime and decorated with different kinds of stonework and paintings which were a marvel to gaze on. . . . I say again that I stood looking at it, and thought that no land like it would ever be discovered in the whole world. . . .[34]

Díaz's memory of the Spanish entrance into Tenochtitlan is one of the most cited passages of his book. Its essence is contained in the phrase "With such wonderful sights to gaze on we did not know what to say, or if this was real that we saw before our eyes."[35]

Contact with the Mexica empire left the Spanish speechless. They saw a public culture but lacked the capacity to understand it. They struggled mightily to interpret and record their impressions of the people whom they had encountered and conquered. Spanish accounts of this period can only be understood through the cultural lenses of the European

invaders. This is equally true when we ponder the conquered peoples. They too were incapable of comprehending the alien assaults upon their lands. Sufficient native accounts survive to suggest their bewilderment at the newly arrived Europeans. A Tarascan informer told a Franciscan priest around 1540 of his peoples' initial impressions of the Spaniards.

> When the Indians first saw the Spaniards, they marveled at such strange people who did not eat the same kind of food or get drunk as the Indians did. They called the Spanish Tucupacha, which means gods, and Teparacha, which means big men and is also used to mean gods, and Acacecha, meaning people who wear big caps and hats. As time passed they began to call them Christians and to believe that they had come from heaven. They were sure that the Spaniards' clothes were the skins of men such as the Indians themselves used on feast occasions.[36]

Both natives and invaders tried to understand each other through their own cultural perspectives, but the profound differences between the two cultures prevented any real interpretive understanding. J. H. Elliot notes that "it is in the nature of conquest that the voices of the victors resound more loudly than those of the vanquished. This is especially true of the Americas, where a world conquered was so soon a world destroyed."[37]

It is the nature of history that those who produce documents play a fundamental role in shaping the future's image of the past. Imagine that a document is produced that describes the encounter between Hernando Cortés and Moctezuma the younger. The author of the document records an image that may or may not reflect the actual encounter. At most the document records its creator's conception of the event. The historian who utilizes that document in the construction of a history can only perceive the actual encounter opaquely and adds a personal layer of shielding to the event. We, as readers, must attempt to filter through multiple layers of shielding before an event can be assessed. The task becomes Herculean if we seek to understand a culture of the past. How does one gain an understanding of a culture that is made alien by the passage of time? Is it possible to speak with any confidence of the meanings of a culture so foreign to our own as that of the Nahua people? How can one hope to penetrate the cosmology of another people? I believe that the most honest answer to these questions is that it is simply impossible to *know* another culture or another time. I suspect that we, like the Spanish chroniclers of the peoples of Mexico, reflect more of our own reality when we seek to describe the past than we do of the actual meanings of those distant lands. We should keep in mind as well that many of the histories available to us were purposely constructed. The Mexica created their own past. The Castillians created an image of the Mexica. Contemporary scholars struggle to construct a perception of the Mexica. All this enables us to glimpse the past only as through a glass, darkly.

With these precautionary words in mind, my hope is to offer you some of the understandings of the Mexica public culture acquired by several students of the Mexican past. My intention is to heighten your sensitivity to three themes: Nahua cosmology; the relationship between the ideology/history and the cosmology of the Mexica and Nahua peoples; and the polity of the Mexican empire. Together, these themes should help to foster an understanding of what the Mexica saw when they encountered the Castillians. I draw, in particular, upon Miguel León-Portilla, who has probably had a greater impact on understandings of the Mexica than any other contemporary scholar. I draw upon the thoughts of Benjamin Keen and Inga Clendinnen as well, both scholars who have sought to craft synthetic images of the people described in the chronicle of Bernal Díaz.

Two legacies of the Mexica written past touch upon themes which are central to this talk:

> There is nothing like death in war,
> nothing like flowery death
> so precious to the Giver of Life:
> Far off I see it: my heart yearns for it![38]

And, in speaking of ritual sacrifice:

> The noble fathers and mothers whose sons must die do not know this, just as their kin and the nurses who reared them as children and gave them milk that nourished them know nothing of it. Their parents suffered great hardships in order to provide them with whatever they needed, that they might eat and drink, and be clothed and shod, until they reached the age at which they are now.
>
> Certainly their parents never foresaw the fate that the children they had reared with such pains must suffer, that they must be killed or made captive on the battlefield.
>
> Grant, oh Lord, that the Sun and the Earth, who are the father and mother of all, receive with peace, joy, and love the nobles who must die in the strife of this war.
>
> You [god] know well what you do in wishing them to die in war, for your purpose in sending them into this world was that they might give the Sun and the Earth to partake of their flesh and blood.[39]

León-Portilla reminds the reader that when a contemporary Mexican reflects upon her or his history, the five centuries of European influence represents only a small segment of the known human habitation of the land upon which they reside. At least 20,000 years of human activity antedated the arrival of the Spaniards, which means that the cultures observed by Díaz

and the other Spaniards were the product of 20 millennia of continuous social development. To seek an understanding of Mexico without this realization is akin to probing the history of the Mediterranean without considering the Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Christian, or Moslem influences. Mexican history does not begin in 1519. At contact, several major cultural groups existed in Mexico, each of which drew upon distinct legacies and had created distinct histories. The largest of these were the Nahua, which included the Mexicans, Tezcocans, and Tlaxcalans. The Maya constituted a second major culture; the Zapotec a third. Scores of other groups occupied the region.

The Mexica, who are generally referred to as the Aztecs, were the dominant polity at the time of conquest. It was they who had written most of the histories through which Spaniards and other Europeans came to know the peoples of Mexico. The Mexican version of the history of Anahuac described their own tribal past, justified their behavior, and sustained their domination of other city-states. The importance of history as a self-justification was clear to the Mexica. Around 1430, as the Mexica freed themselves from tributary domination of earlier states, their ruler ordered the destruction of the ancient books upon which other states had based their histories and religious domination. "It is not necessary for all the common people to know of the writings; government will be defamed, and this will only spread sorcery in the lands; for they contained many falsehoods."[40] Mexican history, therefore, served the Mexican state. Its account of the past justifies and explains the primary features of the visible culture at conquest.

Scholars of pre-contact Mexican history focus upon distinct horizons of history, defined in large part by the evidence of cultural and political domination by a particular city-state. The Mexica and other Nahua polities reckoned time in a comparable historic sense, but also in a cosmological/political sense, in which the past was seen by the trajectory of events, values, influences, and the primacy of certain gods, all of which led to themselves. This, of course, is how we tend to think of our own past.

Nahua time operated in a sequence of ascending spirals, divided into five different ages, each of which shared distinct basic foodstuffs, gods, and cultural characteristics. Life began as the dual-gendered god of the first cause mated with itself to spawn four creator gods, who are identified with the forces of earth, wind, rain, and fire. The forces of these creator gods are in constant conflict, which at preordained times leads to the destruction of the sun, earth, and humans, and brings an end to the age. A distinct sun of motion dominated each age, a sun that persisted only as long as an equilibrium of forces was maintained. In addition to this cosmological time, the cycles of the sun and moon define a bundle of years. The solar cycle divided time into eighteen months of 360 named days, each with distinct meanings, and five "dead days." The Mexica dreaded the dead days, a time in which spirits and gods ran amok, to be allayed only by ritual sacrifice. The 26-day lunar cycle also had distinct

names and meanings. Together, the solar and lunar cycles produced unique dual-day names for 52 years, a bundle of time. The end of a year-bundle could coincide with the end of an age. All fires were extinguished as people appealed to the sun to continue its motion. Consider here the deep uncertainty of Nahua time. Ages, bundles, and solar cycles all ended; ritual behavior could delay ends, but ends would come.

A dense ritual life paralleled this cosmology. Priests occupied an important role in Mexican society. Priests divined the meaning of one's day-sign for earthly activities. Priests led the multiple public rituals so important to Mexican life, especially during the dead days or at the end of a bundle of years. In 1524 a tlatinimie explained the multiple functions of Mexica priests to their Spanish counterparts:

> But, our lords,
> there are those who guide us;
> they govern us, they carry us on their backs
> and instruct us how our gods must be worshipped;
> whose servants we are, like the tail and the wing;
> who make offerings, who burn incense,
> those who receive the title of *Quetzalcóatl*.
> The experts, the knowers of speeches and orations,
> it is their obligation;
> they busy themselves day and night
> with the placing of incense,
> with their offering,
> with the thorns to draw their blood
> Those who see, those who dedicate themselves to observing
> the movements and the orderly operations of the heavens,
> how the night is divided.
> Those who observe the codices, those who [tell what they read].
> Those who noisily turn the pages of the illustrated manuscripts.
> Those who have possession of the black and red ink and of that
> which is pictured;
> they lead us, they guide us, they tell us the way.
> Those who arrange how a year falls,
> how the counting of destinies, and days, and each of the twenty-day
> months all follow their courses.
> With this they busy themselves, to them it falls to speak of the gods.[41]

The fifth age began for the Mexica with the founding of Teotihuacan, the "metropolis of the gods," a city whose physical remains are a Mexican national monument. The fifth age began with the self-sacrifice of the god Nanahuatzin, who became the sun of that age upon his death. Despite the blood sacrifice of Nanahuatzin, the new sun did not move across the sky. The movement of the sun required a reciprocal sacrifice by humans.

How will we live?
The sun does not move!
How, indeed, will we make the people live?
Let the sun become strong through us,
let us sacrifice ourselves, let us all die![42]

The Mexican cosmological origins here join the receipt of life at the dawn of the new age by "divine sacrifice" with the realization that "human beings would be left to bear the burden of reciprocity, maintaining the life of the sun with their own blood."[43]

The metropolis of the gods not only gave the Mexica a cosmological foundation, it provided them with a cultural model after which they patterned much of their social lives. Many of the gods whose temples in Tenochtitlan had so impressed the Spaniards had been worshipped in Teotihuacan. To compare Teotihuacan to Athens is to make an appropriate analogy. The image of Teotihuacan served as a model of urbanity, of the achievement of skilled artisans, and of knowledge. Knowledge here has several meanings. On one level, knowledge is synonymous with the god Quetzalcoatl, a complex god with unitary and dualist symbolism for the Mexica. Although the water god, Tlaloc, appears to have been the chief deity of the city, Quetzalcoatl is dominant in much of the sculpture and ritual of the city. Quetzalcoatl might be seen as akin to Athena, a source of worldly wisdom and divine inspiration. From Quetzalcoatl comes the capacity to record thought, both in oral tradition —myth—and on the painted pages—the written word. Knowledge is the black and the red, the colors of Quetzalcoatl, the colors of wisdom. The urbanism of Tenochtitlan drew upon the model of Teotihuacan, which was constructed around a religious–political core. Open spaces gave the core a spaciousness that drew attention to the monuments of the religious–political culture, monuments that were periodically expanded in honor of the gods. The quadrants of the city each contained a smaller core, as well as a marketplace. Teotihuacan was to the Nahua people "the most ancient root of their religious thought, of their art, and, of the principal institutions of the subsequent cultures of Anahuac....."[44]

The Toltec peoples of Tula represent a second reference point of Mexica public culture. Here Quetzalcoatl is supplemented by warlike gods, which in time come to dominate the Mexica pantheon of gods. Quetzacoatl provided the Toltecs with bountiful crops, fostered learning, and stimulated the arts. Quetzacoatl demanded sacrifices only of jade, snakes, and butterflies. However, the primary Toltec god was Tezcatlipoca, a powerful god who required human sacrifice. The Mexica recall a struggle between these two gods, one in which Quetzacoatl's functions were reduced to those of wisdom. In time, Tezcatlipoca forced Quetzacoatl to flee to the east, from whence a return was promised at the end of the fifth age, which many Mexica thought would come in 1519, as it corresponded to the end of a bundle of years. Tula eventually declined, after which Anahuac witnessed the rise and decline of multiple city-states, including, eventually, the Mexica.

The Mexica myth of origin is visible on the Mexican flag and on its currency. Here one sees the eagle perched upon a cactus bush clutching a snake, symbolic of the founding of Tenochtitlan in a reedy portion of Lake Texcoco. The Mexica claimed to have been sent on a pilgrimage from the land of the Seven Caves to the autonomy they found at Tenochtitlan by their patron god Huitzilopochtli, the "Hummingbird of the South." Huitzilopochtli counseled the Mexica priests at one stop on the pilgrimage to seize the daughter of the local chief, flay her skin, and wear it in ritual dance, turning her into a "Warrior Woman." The Mexica fled the wrath of the chief, whereupon Huitzilopochtli led them to the reedy lake, where the eagle greeted them in reward.

> Then they arrived
> there where the nopal cactus rises
> Near the rocks they saw with joy
> how an eagle on that nopal proudly lifted its head.
> It was eating something there,
> it was tearing it while eating.
>
> When the eagle saw the Mexicas,
> it bowed its head.[45]

The nopal cactus's fruit is green on the exterior with a blood red core about the size of a human heart. Scattered about the eagle were the bones of animals and the feathers of precious birds. Whether the Mexica really traveled from afar to this site, or whether the myth is an analogy of their achievement vis-a-vis more powerful polities is at one level immaterial. More significant is the association of the Mexica origin myth with the splendor of the Toltecs, a political legitimization that had been guided by Huitzilopochtli and sanctified with a symbol of human sacrifice.

The Mexica record the birth of their capital in 1325. For 100 years the Mexican polity advanced, strengthened, and gradually established itself as a potency in the lake region. Huitzilopochtli guided the Mexica, especially under the hand of Tlacaelel, the power behind the Mexican throne, for two-score years after 1427.

> No one was so valiant,
> as the first one, the greatest, the one honored in the kingdom,
> the great captain in war, the very valiant Tlacaelel. ...
> He was also the one who knew how to make
> of Huitzilopochtli the god of the Mexicas ....[46]

Now emerged the physical domination of the city by the great temples to Huitzilopochtli, the elevation of a mystic militarism that sought sacrificial victims in ritual flowery wars and imperial conflicts, and so many of the other characteristics recorded by the Spaniards.

In the 100 years before conquest the Mexica surpassed the glory of the Toltecs under the domination of Huitzilopochtli. Nowhere is this domination more apparent than in the symbolic submission to the flowery wars. Flowery wars served to provide massive numbers of offerings to Huitzilopochti or to

commemorate a temple expansion. These lethal contests were arranged between the leaders of the city-states among the alliance and empire. Warriors from each polity would meet on a field of battle, seeking not to kill their opponents, but to bring them to subjugation, capture them, and return them to Tenochtitlan.

> Let those sons of the Sun be sacrificed. . . Because our god must not have to rely on the occasion of some grievance that leads to war. Instead, let something handy be found, a market where . . . our god with his army can go to buy victims and people to eat. And how wonderful for it to be thus, just like being at the side of a griddle, nearby he can find his hot tortillas whenever he wants and feels like eating, and let our people and armies attend these fairs to buy with their blood, and with their heads, and with their hearts and lives, the precious stones, emeralds, and rubies, and the wide, dazzling, long and well placed feathers for the service of the admirable Huitzilopochtli.[47]

Tlacaelel first sanctified this ritual struggle to supply food for the sun in the dedication of the expansion of Huitzilopochtli's temple. Thereafter, the flowery wars served as symbolic submission to Mexica dominion by feeding its gods.

Human sacrifice provoked a repulsion among the Spanish which juxtaposed the wonder of Díaz. Francisco de Aguilar, also a soldier with Cortés, notes the diabolical role of the priests in that ritual:

> They had large towers with a house of worship at the top, and close to the entrance a low stone, about knee-high, where the men or women who were to be sacrificed to their gods were thrown on their backs and of their own accord remained perfectly still. A priest then came out with a stone-knife . . . and with this knife he opened the part where the heart is and took out the heart, without the person who was being sacrificed uttering a word.[48]

León-Portilla writes:

> The offering of blood (re-enacting the primeval sacrifice of the gods when they created this cosmic age) helped to restore the divine energy, propitiating the gods, and obtaining from them the vital gift of the waters. To fulfil this destiny, the cult of the gods, human sacrifice and the fighting of wars to obtain captives and impose Aztec rule, became the primary concerns of the dominant group. In this respect the erection and restoration of the temples . . . and the organization and effectiveness of the army, supported by a complex ideology, were the most imposing achievements of the Mexica dominant group.[49]

Feeding the gods of the Mexica meant the acceptance of Mexican history. The ideology of the state defined that history and sense of being. The essence of this ideology is clear in a song of the period.

Making circles of jade, the city is spread out,
radiating rays of light like a quetzal feather, Mexico is here.
The princes are carried in boats near it,
above them a flowery mist spreads out.

It is your city, Giver of Life, you reign here:
in Anahuac, your songs are heard,
they spread out above the people!

Here in Mexico the white willows stand,
here the white bullrushes;
you, like a blue heron extend your wings flying,
you open them adorning your servants.

He stirs the blaze,
he pronounces his word of command
to the four directions of the universe.
There is a dawn of war in the city![50]

Although the Mexica reserved for themselves the singular credit for the construction of the empire, the earliest momentum came as a result of an alliance between three cities, the Triple Alliance. The revolt begun in 1427 joined the Mexican with the Texcocan and Tlatelocan polities, an alliance that emerged victorious three years later. Within a generation, the Triple Alliance had forced tribute systems upon all city-states in the lake region and had expanded beyond the Valley of Mexico. The Mexica came to dominate the alliance, subjugating the Tlatelocan power altogether by 1473 and forcing the Texcocans into a junior role. At the time of Moctezuma the younger's ascension to the leadership of the empire in 1502, the Mexican tribute state extended south to Guatemala, west to the Pacific, and east to the Gulf of Mexico.

The Mexican state demanded tribute from all subject city-states. Its assertion of Toltecan heritage was sufficiently accepted so that most of the city-states in the Valley of Mexico submitted voluntarily to Mexica rule. The Mexican state did not extract onerous tribute from these polities, primarily those necessities such as grain required by a non-rural people and assistance in the event of a military campaign. Above all, the Mexica demanded that allied and tribute polities accept their history. Teotihuacan and Tula were shared references to all peoples of the Nahua culture; to accept the Mexica version of that culture was to accept the Mexica as the legitimate polity of the age.

The Mexica received other forms of tribute. They asked for labor for major building projects such as an expansion of a temple. Important ritual occasions necessitated sacrificial victims. Marriages often linked the leading lineages of these subject polities to that of the Mexica, but there is little indication that an Incan style bureaucracy developed. The Mexica did not develop a unified,

imperial army. When allied polities marched to war, they followed their own leaders and displayed their own tribal symbols. This fragile imperial polity, based on an assertion of legitimate descent from the mythic Toltec and on tenuous marriage ties, helps account for the rapidity of the empire's collapse. Inga Clenndinen asserts that the "empire was an acrobat's pyramid, a precarious structure of the more privileged lording it over the less, with those poised on the highest level triumphant, but nervously attentive to any premonitory shift or shuffle from below."[51]

The shuffle from below, as will be seen, came as a companion of the Spaniards. The lake allies of the Mexica helped to repel the Spanish invasion, but many tribute city-states fought on the side of the invaders. Scores of polities had been incorporated into the empire within the two generations prior to conquest, leaving bitter memories near the historical surface. Mexican ambassadors would generally precede the empire's warriors, seeking tribute or trade relations under terms favorable to the empire. A repudiation of the terms would bring the jaguar-warriors, whose victims would feed the appetite of Huitzilopochtli. A denial of a Mexica request for labor participation in a state project might foretell the same results. A third route of conquest followed Mexican merchants in search of goods. Again, the fate was often the same—subjugation, tribute, and sacrificial victims.

Mexican cosmology, created history, and imperial fragility combined in the early 1500s. Moctezuma the younger, who was elected to power in 1502, was a deeply religious man. This religiousity did not imply weakness, as he assumed strong control of the Mexica empire. His appointments, however, suggest a less bellicose attitude than those of his predecessors. He was certainly more studious, passing much time with the painted books, especially those that pertained to Quetzalcoatl. Moctezuma sought to understand the gods of the subject polities, often bringing their priests to Tenochtitlan. Indeed, a "house of the diverse gods" was constructed in the city's core. Still, flowery wars continued, as did the conquest of new city-states. Tributary towns throughout the empire bristled under Mexican control in the 1510s, a time when ominous signs of the future appeared frequently. Priests divined omens in events such as the birth of a child with two heads. Nearby volcanos were unusually active. A brilliant comet streaked across the sky, lightening the day in its brilliance. In 1517 news from the Yucatan coast brought messages of floating houses with white strangers in them. Lightning struck and burnt the temple of Huitzilopochtli. Moctezuma became increasingly anxious about the return of Quetzalcoatl. His priestly advisors told him:

> What can we say? The future has already been determined and decreed in heaven, and Motecuhzoma will behold and suffer a great mystery which must come to pass in his land. If our king wishes to know more about it, he will know soon enough, for it comes swiftly. This is what we predict, since he demands that we speak, and since it must surely take place, he can only wait for it.[52]

The end of a bundle of years, the year Ce Acatl, One Reed, 1519, approached. So too, did the Spaniards. Cortés and his men landed in April 1519. Within days emissaries from Tenochtitlan cajoled the Spaniards to depart with wealthy gifts. Priests and imperial officials attempted to prevent the Spaniards from marching to the interior.

> When Motecuhzoma heard that they were investigating him extensively, that they were inquiring into his person, that the "gods" wanted very much to see his face, his heart quickened, he was filled with great anguish. He was about to flee, he desired to flee; he sought to run away and hide, to hide his anxiety. He wanted to hide from them, he wanted to slip away from the "gods" . . .
>
> But he could not do this. He could not conceal himself, he could not hide. He was no longer strong, no longer fervent; now nothing could be done. . . .
>
> The words of the magicians had driven his heart mad, had ripped it out, had made it spin, had left it withered and depressed, it kept him totally unsure and too insecure to properly assess [if he could hide] where mentioned.
>
> He did no more than wait for them. He did no more than to resolve it in his heart, he did no more than resign himself. [But] at last he dominated his heart, he was consumed within himself, he was left ready to see and be astonished by whatever was to occur.[53]

Moctezuma waited to be astonished.

The profound uncertainty of Mexican thought is visible in their cosmology and sense of time closure. Mexica public culture revolved around these poles in an orbit defined by mystico-political needs. It is visible in Moctezuma's interpretation of the Spanish presence. Was this the return of Quetzacoatl? Had an age come to an end?

> Truly do we live on earth?
> Not forever on earth; only a little while here.
> Although it be jade, it will be broken,
> Although it be gold, it will be crushed,
> Although it be *quetzal* feather, it is torn asunder.
> Not forever on earth; only a little while here.[54]

An age had come to an end. Document makers had changed. Different historians now wrote history. A distinct past was created. One final poem can be used to assess any increased understanding of the Mexica public culture. You may be the judge of how much *you* now know what to say about Tenochtitlan.

Flowers and Songs of Sorrow

Nothing but flowers and songs of sorrow
are left in Mexico and Tlatelolco,
where once we saw warriors and wise men

We know it is true
that we must perish,
for we are mortal men
You, the Giver of Life,
you have ordained it

We wander here and there
in our desolate poverty.
We are mortal men
We have seen bloodshed and pain
where once we saw beauty and valor.

We are crushed to the ground;
we lie in ruins.
There is nothing but grief and suffering in Mexico and Tlatelolco,
where once we saw beauty and valor.

Have you grown weary of your servants?
Are you angry with your servants,
O Giver of Life?[55]