

*“Our Death is in our Wombs:” the Aztec womb as a Locus of Creation and Destruction*

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Wombs are symbolically complex spaces in a number of Mesoamerican societies. Among the Aztec or Nahua, the womb was conceptually manifest in bathhouses and caves.<sup>1</sup> It was a feminine space that had to be entered by men for the human and spiritual creative processes to continue. Wombs empowered women, enabling them to be mothers and midwives, while also oppressing them, as childbirth could lead to premature death and motherhood confined women to the home. In the following essay I will argue that Aztec ideas about creation were partly defined by two paradigms: the belief that the eventual destruction of all human life was inevitable and the conviction that the creation of life is often accompanied by destruction. Furthermore, I will posit that the womb was a locus of both creation and destruction, a place of protection and danger, most obviously in the realm of human pregnancy.

The Nahua expectation of their own demise is especially apparent in their poetry, which suggests that even inorganic matter is impermanent. The following untitled poem, originally written in Nahuatl by Nezahualcoyotl (1402-1472) and translated by Thelma Sullivan, reflects the transience of life and matter:

Can it be true that one lives on earth?  
Not forever of earth; only a little while here.  
Be it jade, it shatters.  
Be it gold, it breaks.  
Be it quetzal feather, it tears apart.  
Not forever on earth; only a little while here  
(Sullivan and Knab 1994: 162-3) (Leon-  
Portilla 241).

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper I will use Nahua and Aztec interchangeably to refer to all the peoples who spoke Nahuatl. The term Mexica refers specifically to the people of Tenochtitlan.

This poem acknowledges the ephemeral quality of life and of the things precious to the Aztec people, such as jade, gold, and quetzal feathers. In a parallel fashion, Sahagún recorded Nahua prayers to the god Tezcatlipoca in which the speakers recognize the frailty of their lives and world. In prayers during a plague, the Aztecs cry, “Will the governed come to an end? Will emptiness, darkness prevail in the city? Will it not be?” (Sahagún 1950-1982: 6:3). Though these Aztecs suffered from a human plague, they anticipated the destruction of inanimate objects. They ask Tezcatlipoca if he will destroy his own temples, his own “places of vigil” (Sahagún 1950-1982: 6:3). It is worth noting that the language of Aztec poetry and much of what Sahagún recorded is a type of rhetorical speech taught to wealthy and elite young men, and thus this language should not be regarded as a reflection of the sentiments of an entire population. That said, the body of surviving Aztec literature has such a pessimistic tone that it must somewhat reflect the general mindset of the populace.

The Aztec belief in the inevitability of an apocalypse may be tied to one of their creation myths. At the time of the Spanish conquest, the Aztecs were living in the fifth sun, or the fifth creation. In their concept of the world, four suns had come before, and four worlds had been completely created and destroyed. The story is recounted in the text *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus Pinturas*, written for Bishop Ramirez de Fuen Leal shortly after the Spanish conquest (Phillips 1883: 619-621). In each of the previous creations, the sun was anthropomorphized as a god, who would eventually stop being the sun, causing the destruction of the earth’s population. Each destruction of an earlier world occurred at the close of a 52-year cycle, the time when the Aztecs celebrated the New Fire Ceremony and when their ritual cycle sought to appease the gods. Living in the fifth creation, the Aztecs believed that their world would be destroyed by earthquake, a

fairly imminent threat in the Valley of Mexico, which lies near a number of active volcanoes whose rumblings and tremblings likely seemed divine threats.

The period of the New Fire ceremony was especially fraught with peril for pregnant women. Tzitzimime, frightening and dangerous creatures, were believed to descend during periods of transition to attack and eat people (Klein 2000:1-2). An image of a tzitzimime from the *Codex Magliabechiano* shows a figure with personified joints, a necklace of hearts, hands and livers, and wild hair (Fig. 1). Cecelia Klein notes that a number of the goddesses associated with childbirth were both goddesses and tzitzimime, and that they threatened pregnant women. This danger concerned the midwives who cared for pregnant women, as demonstrated in a manuscript illustration from the *Codex Tudela* (Fig. 2). A midwife kneels and prays at a skull and cross bone altar, her arms outstretched and her legs wrapped tightly in a skirt (Klein 2000: 5)<sup>2</sup>. This altar is associated with the New Fire Ceremony, because archaeologist Alfonso Caso discovered one of these altars buried with an effigy stone reed bundle (Caso 1935: 300). The *Codex Borbonicus* includes an image of ritual participants burning these reed bundles during the New Fire Ceremony, confirming their association with this 52-year event (Klein 2000:7-8) (Fig. 3). In a small scene on the far right side of this image, a pregnant woman hides within the bathhouse, presumably to be protected from the possible descent of tzitzimime. She is further guarded by an armed soldier stationed in front of the bathhouse. This demonstrates that the threat of tzitzimime to pregnant women during the New Fire Ceremony was acknowledged not only by praying midwives, but also by pregnant women themselves, who sought protection within the symbolic womb of the bathhouse, and by the community at large, which provided a military guard.

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<sup>2</sup> As Klein notes, this figure is identifiable as a midwife in the Spanish text accompanying the illustration, which identifies the woman as a “*vieja hechizera*,” or old sorceress. The Spanish regarded midwives as witches, and the figure is in the common kneeling pose of a midwife (Klein 2000: 5).

Why did such bathhouses seem appropriate shelters for pregnant women during dangerous periods? Bathhouses were seen as the womb of the Mother Goddess, who is characterized by a number of identities and manifestations. Telling the pregnant woman to enter the bathhouse, the midwife said, “Let my daughter enter the Mother of All, the Grandmother, Yohualticitl” (Sullivan and Knab 1994: 129) (Fig. 4). The “Grandmother of the Bathhouse,” Temazcalteci, is pictured in the *Codex Magliabechiano* as a personified bathhouse (Sullivan: 1982:19). The bathhouse comprises her body, and her face is attached to its center. The flames surrounding the rounded dome of the bathhouse can also be read as hair, and the two dots on her cheeks are repeated on the bathhouses exterior walls. The rounded shape of its dome is reminiscent of the womb, and the presence of water beneath her head indicates that the bathhouse was warmed with moist heat. The Nahuatl imagined the interior of the womb as a warm, moist and dark place, and the interior of the bathhouse would have been quite similar to the imagined womb (Sullivan and Knab 1994: 247, n.4). Since the bathhouse is equated with Temazcalteci, and because she is closely tied to the earth mother, Tlazolteotl-Teteo, the bathhouse should be regarded as the symbolic womb of the earth. According to the *Codex Carolino*, when a new mother had a successful delivery, she would throw cotton into the hearth of the bathhouse (Garibay 1967: 57). Since the Nahuatl word for hearth, *xictli*, also translates as “navel,” the hearth is the navel of the mother earth goddess, a section of her anatomy physically connected to the uterus by the umbilical cord and thus associated with childbirth (Sullivan 1982:18). Pregnant women entered the bathhouses to receive comfort during their pregnancies, and it was here that the midwives massaged the baby into the correct position for birthing (Sullivan and Knab 1994: 129; Sahagún 1950-1982:155). The bathhouse was a place of relaxation and preparation for pregnant

women. That a pregnant woman is shown hidden in a bathhouse during the New Fire Ceremony establishes that this was also a space of safety and protection. As the womb of the earth mother and her associated mother goddesses, the pregnant women who entered therein symbolically returned to their natal state as well. The baby was doubly protected by his mother's womb and by the womb of the earth itself when the mother entered the bathhouse.

While the bathhouse was a locus of comfort and preparation for pregnant women, it was also the place in which they were enclosed if they began to die during labor (Sahagún 1950-1982: 6:160). If a woman had been in labor for an entire day and night without having delivered the baby, the midwife would take her into the bathhouse and try to facilitate the delivery by manipulating the position of the fetus and administering special medicines (Sahagún 1950-1982 6:160). If the baby still adhered tightly to the womb—a problem blamed equally on having sex too late during the pregnancy and the wrath of the gods—the midwife would either cut the baby from the womb or she would close herself and the woman in the bathhouse until the woman died (Sahagún 1950-1982: 6:160). In this context, the womb of the bathhouse was not a place for the creation or protection of life, but rather the locus of its destruction. Just as the baby died within the womb of its mother, the mother died within the womb of the mother earth. This is in accord with the Aztec's complex view of the deity of the earth, who generated life-giving plants and animals, but also was the receptacle of the dead, absorbing their blood into her soil and eroding their flesh over time.

When a woman died during the powerful act of creation she became a Cihuateteo, a dangerous and liminal being who helped escort the sun every night from its zenith to sunset (Klein 2000:8; Sahagún 1950-1982: 6:161-165). Furthermore, she threatened

young children and mothers-to-be, attacking women upon her descent to earth in search of weaving implements (Klein 2000:8). Women who died in childbirth were believed to be so potent that soldiers would try to steal pieces of their bodies to carry into battle (Sahagún 1950-1982: 6:161). The accounts suggest that the bathhouse was an ideal space in which the woman could become liminal and dangerous. It was here, near the heart of the mother earth, that babies were made ready to come into the world and that their mothers were made ready to leave it. In the womb of the earth, mother and child were in a space partly profane and partly sacred, within the body of mother earth, yet still having a fully mortal consciousness. The bathhouse protected the integrity of their bodies by sheltering them from scavenging soldiers and provided an additional layer between these dangerous persons and society (Houston 1996:139).

That the bathhouse both welcomed new life and witnessed the passage of a mother's life is in accord with another feature of Aztec religious consciousness—the belief that the destruction of life was frequently a prerequisite to, or at least a companion of, its creation. This belief is especially clear in two Aztec creation myths. In the account of the creation of the sun and moon recorded in Book 7 of Sahagún's *Florentine Codex*, the sun and moon were created through the sacrifice of two gods, Tecuciztecatl and Nanauatzin (Sahagún 1953: 7: 3-9). In another myth, Quetzalcoatl needs the bones from an earlier creation to make people. Had this earlier creation not been destroyed, Quetzalcoatl would not have had the needed materials to create humankind (Leon-Portilla 1980: 140-142).

The association of creation with destruction is apparent in language used during the hiring of a midwife and between a midwife and an expectant mother. Pregnancy was both a time of joy, because a couple had been given the gift of a baby, and a time of

sorrow and uncertainty (Sullivan and Knab 1994: 123). Rather than expressing confidence, the midwife spoke to the family of her uncertainty about her ability to deliver the baby, and empathized with the family's sorrow that the young woman must give birth (Sullivan and Knab 1994:126). "It is because of her, your precious necklace, your quetzal feather...that you weep and are sorrowful" (Sullivan and Knab 1994:126). The midwife later commented, "You understand that for all women our death is in our wombs. By chance does the child, does the girl, know this yet?" (Sullivan and Knab 1994:132). This chilling statement alludes both to the possibility that the mother will die during childbirth and to the location of a laboring woman's death, in the bathhouse-womb of the earth goddess. Although I have found no data about death rates of Aztec women during parturition, the overwhelmingly pessimistic tone of rhetorical dialogues about childbirth suggest that both infant and mother mortality rates were high.

The complex interrelationship between wombs, creation and destruction is especially clear in examinations of the Aztec earth mother goddess. The earth mother goddess was the creator of all plant and animal life, and because this life exists all over the earth, she was seen as emitting life from her entire being. The position of the earth mother goddess as genetrix is complicated by her dichotomous role as the receptacle and consumer of all organic waste, a role revealed in the meaning of her name (Sullivan 1982:15). *Tlazolteotl* is derived from the Nahuatl word for "filth," *tlazolli* (Sullivan 1982:7). Dead bodies were entombed within her, and she absorbed their essence through the process of decay. If we are to regard her entire being as a womb, then burial entombs the dead within a womb, just as the woman who is dying in childbirth is entombed within the bathhouse womb. In both cases, death becomes an avenue to rebirth, and the womb, from which all human beings emerge into life, becomes the place they return upon death.

The connection between the Tlazolteotl-Ixcuina as devourer and creator is especially poignant in an image from the *Codex Borbonicus* (Fig. 5). Squatting deeply in a childbirth pose, with the legs spread and the knees extended, a small version of the goddess is exiting her vagina (Sullivan 1982:14). This seemingly paradoxical identification rests on the baby's wearing the same earrings, headdress and necklace as her mother. Her labor results in both a birth and rebirth; she gives birth to a baby, but the baby is a new version of the goddess. Significantly, a small version of the goddess can be seen entering the goddess near her head, just as dead humans are entombed within the earth's surface. In the *Borbonicus* image Tlazolteotl-Ixcuina wears the serrated skin of a sacrificial victim. Significantly, the goddess's skin is covered with the very essence of death, the rotting flesh of a human being signifying the blood offerings that are soaked into her earthly flesh by the Nahua. It is as if her action of birth/rebirth is fueled by the rotting flesh of dead humanity, its presence over her own flesh reminding one of the dead who are likely in her womb. Absorbing death while creating life, the Tlazolteotl-Ixcuina is the ultimate representation of the womb as the location of creation and destruction.

In sum, the womb was a sacred and complex space among the Nahua. Bathhouses were directly associated with the womb of the mother earth goddess, and as such were places into which mortals could enter the body of a divine figure and be closer to the divine realm. The womb of the mortal female is not untouched by the mother earth goddess, because the "Lord of the Earth" was credited with giving the women their offspring (Sullivan and Knab 1994:123). The womb was also a space of magical transformation: within both anatomical and metaphorical wombs, babies were formed, humans were healed, girls became mothers, and young mothers-to-be were transformed into Cihuateteo. Dichotomously, the womb was also a place of death and destruction.



Women dying in childbirth were enclosed in the bathhouse for their own protection and for the protection of society. Infants often died within their mother's womb, or passed away shortly after having left that protective cavity. When human beings died, they were entombed within the womb of the mother earth goddess, and through the process of decay were transformed into bones. The midwife's announcement that "Our death is in our wombs," acknowledged only one perspective of the womb—its role in the destruction of lives (Sullivan and Knab 1994:132). What the midwife did not acknowledge was that while the womb is the locus of destruction for some, it is the place of creation for all. In all its manifestations the womb is a highly liminal space. When human beings are hovering between life and death, be it during the circumstance of birth or illness, they are taken to the liminal womb of the bathhouse, its power for transformation moving its inhabitants either closer to life or nearer to death. Perhaps the passage into a new realm of existence was eased by being within an already liminal space.

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