



Left: MAYAHUEL, goddess of Agave, holding a rope of Maguey and with foaming pulque in her head-dress. Drawn by Carol D. Crosswhite following the illustration in Codex Borbonicus, now in Paris. **Right:** TEZCATLIPOCA, god of darkness, eating the hand of a sacrificed prisoner. The god's left foot was severed by Earth Monster and is replaced by a Smoking Mirror. Drawn by Carol D. Crosswhite following the illustration in the Codex Fejervary-Mayer in the Liverpool City Museum, England.

Agave and the Pre-Cortés Religion of the Mexican Altiplano Central. This issue of *Desert Plants* deals with *Agave*, a genus of plants so important in pre-Conquest Mexico that it became inextricably a part of the pre-contact religion. Just as John F. Kennedy claimed "Ich bin ein Berliner," we all share a heritage from the Nahuatl people of the Valley of Mexico, now the Distrito Federál and surrounding regions. The Nahuatl COYOTL, OCELOTL, MESQUITL, CHOCOLATL, HUACOMOLI, METATL and HURAKÁN which are now our Coyote, Ocelot, Mesquite, Chocolate, Guacomole, Metate and Hurricane are superficial examples only. Occupation by Cortés and succeeding Spaniards created a melding of two strong peoples and the present Mexico City, indisputable hub of the Mexican subcontinent. Held in high esteem today in the Altiplano and elsewhere are the people who we now call AZTECS, those who came from AZTLÁN, the Seven Caves of the North, following HUITZILOPOCHTLI, the Hummingbird on the Left, and sucking with him the nectar of the *Agave* and the flowers of war! Huitzilopochtli's poor mother sent him off to the south with two sets of *Agave* sandals, one pair to wear while conquering each new city, the other to wear as he eventually lost each city in the same order. How stoic these Aztecs!

Human sacrifice to the god of fire, Xiuhtecuhtli, the god of the Center (and the Up and the Down) was ancient and well-known to the Aztecs. The fire of hearth and home was central but each major directional path from home was also important. The major deities of the cardinal directions were the black TEZCATLIPOCA (North), the white QUETZALCÓATL (West), the red XIPE TÓTEC (East, a red alter-ego of Tezcatlipoca), and the blue HUITZILOPOCHTLI (South, a blue alter-ego of Tezcatlipoca). Since Tezcatlipoca was the god of night, it was

convenient for him (as Xipe) to hide in the red inner shade of another person's skin in order to go abroad in the daytime. The red color symbol of Xipe is appropriate because of the blood shed by the victim chosen for flaying. The blue color symbol of Huitzilopochtli was appropriate because the Aztecs saw him streaking across the blue sky as the god of the sun and across the blue sky of the local scene as the hummingbird. Huitzilopochtli flew fast and high but as an alter-ego of Tezcatlipoca could not be seen setting foot on earth in the day (unless as in the case of the *Agave* sandals it was in either ascending or descending to power). Huitzilopochtli defied (by rapid and high flight) being caught by man, beast or god, in contradistinction to the black alter-ego (Tezcatlipoca) whose foot had been torn off by Earth Monster. As the Aztecs devoted themselves to the Hummingbird God and moved south, they made him their god of war in inspiration from and in allusion to his powers. They believed that brave warriors fallen in battle went to TONATIUHICHAN, the House of the Sun, sipping nectar there from flowers and fighting mock battles. After four years the warriors fully transformed to hummingbirds and came back to earth.

As opposed to Quetzalcóatl, Tezcatlipoca and his alter-egos (sometimes called "disguises") demanded sacrifice of a portion of the population, as also did Xiuhtecuhtli and various minor deities. The Aztecs saw Xiuhtecuhtli as the "old god" with a wrinkled face and a brazier on his head like a barbecue grill. Sacrifice to him annually involved throwing victims onto hot searing coals, as if pumping adrenalin into the old god, pulling the living sizzling bodies out with grappling

potential good of novelties and inventions which might at first seem somewhat bizarre. As the Plumed Serpent, depicted as bird and snake, Quetzalcóatl is the beneficent god of all mankind. As the Axolotl this last remaining god seemed to be killed by the arrows of the sun but actually split into an ethereal EHÉCATL (plumed god of the wind) and a serpent-like (but often rather dog-faced) terrestrial CÓATL (perhaps originally the adult slithering form of *Ambystoma*, which may have been considered a monster because dog-faced and serpent-like but having legs). In any event the twin deity in his dog-faced serpent state penetrated the world of the dead and stole the bones of the dead humans of past destroyed worlds. Escaping with the bones but with the infernal demons of the dead in hot pursuit, the twin deity emerged Phoenix-like as the beautiful Quetzalcóatl. Taking *Agave* spines, he sacrificed some of his own blood, sprinkling it over the bones to bring to life the human beings of the present world. Quetzalcóatl is the god of resurrection, the "precious twin" who appears in the heavens as the Morning Star and again in the afternoon as the Evening Star (Xólotl). Being devoted to life, he resurrected the other gods as well. His earthly representation as TLAHUITZCALPANTECUHTLI has two faces, one of a living man, the other a skull.

Quetzalcóatl is the hero founder of agriculture and industry, the plumed serpent god of wind and life. As the wind of the storm clouds, he flies with plumed wings, but when he once again causes TLÁLOC and the rain of the storm to give life to the plants, his goodness slithers over the ground to become re-doubled in the crops. On July

16, AD 750, at the time of a solar eclipse, with Venus appearing extremely close to the sun, Quetzalcóatl, the good god of agriculture—as well as of science, industry and art—set off into the Caribbean on a raft of serpent skins, not to be seen again until a predicted return in the Nahuatl year CE ÁCATL. Quetzalcóatl's directional orientation among the gods made him the "white" god and he was often depicted having a beard. One can imagine the consternation of MOTECZUMA II when in the year Ce Ácatl (AD 1519) "giant winged canoes" of Cortés were cited off the coast of Mexico. The ships landed on Maundy Thursday of 1519 but Cortés did not disembark until the next day which was GOOD FRIDAY to the Spaniards but was, by strange coincidence, the birthday of Quetzalcóatl in the Aztec calendar! This was Year 1 of the new order, wherein the patron of agriculture, science, industry and art, who did not demand massive human sacrifice, had returned! Surely the white-faced and bearded Cortés with his strange hat and shining armor, coming as he did in a winged canoe, appeared every bit as monstrose as Quetzalcóatl, himself a monstrosity and alter-ego god of monstrosities. Interestingly, present-day Corn (*Zea mays*) is considered by many modern botanists to be a monstrose redoubled derivative of Teocentli (see *Desert Plants*, Volume 3, Number 4), and useful economic cultivars of *Agave* to be pentaploid or other ploidal monstrosities or re-doublings! One naturally wonders if the good of Quetzalcóatl did not indeed slither over the ground to become instilled in these crops as Xólotl stirred to miraculously produce these good monstrosities! —F. S. Crosswhite.

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hooks, then piercing the chests with a stone knife to rip the still-beating hearts out as an offering. But such sacrifice to Xiuhtecuhtli, whom they saw as the old god HUEHUETÉOTL, was merely calendric and became perfunctory. To be on the safe side all old fire was extinguished at the end of its lifetime (52 years) and a strong new fire created which was distributed to all the hearths. Sacrifice to the god of hunting involved shooting arrows into an *Agave*, since the Aztecs were no longer major hunters, then carrying bound victims (as if they were deer) to the tops of pyramids where their beating hearts were liberated from their chests. To the agricultural Aztecs, this sacrifice too seems to have been a token event.

The hallmark of the MÉXICA of TENOCHTITLÁN was sacrifice to Huitzilopochtli, their Hummingbird God of Sun and War. Making of the intoxicating drink PULQUE from *Agave* by the Méxica necessitated "castrating" the plant by removing the embryonic reproductive structures or flowering stalk so that flowers and seeds were not produced. The energy ebbed from the leaves and flowed into the central heart of the plant. Pulque was a liquid having a flame to warm the human spirit. Although Xiuhtecuhtli was god of the Center, the symbolic color of the Center and the Up and the Down was green rather than the red or yellow of flame. The preciousness of the center and the up and the down of the present is epitomized by the Jade, referred to as CHALCHIHUITL. Aside from the green heart of the rosette of the *Agave*, another word, CHALCHIHUATL ("Precious Liquid") refers to the nectar flowing from it. By castrating the *Agave* to make pulque, the Aztecs seem to have realized that they were depriving the pollinating hummingbird of his CHALCHIHUATL. As children of Huitzilopochtli the Aztecs determined to remedy the deprivation and to regularly feed their chosen god. The word Chalchihuatl also came to mean "Nectar Fed to the Gods" in the sense of human blood. The Méxica brought captives of war first directly to the temples at the tops of the

pyramids, gave them pulque to drink and dedicated them to Huitzilopochtli. From that day on their bodies contained the Chalchihuatl belonging to the hummingbird god. The captives lived peacefully as servants of their masters and were fattened for a good length of time. During famines and other occasions of religious need, including calendric ceremonies, the captives were again taken to the temples and for the second time willingly drank pulque, but this time the *Agave* nectar pulsating through their veins and vessels was liberated and offered to Huitzilopochtli as the beating heart was ripped from the chest. Then the flesh of the victims was cooked and eaten by the Méxica in a solemn communion. This vigorously prosecuted sacrifice largely superceded sacrifice to the "old, wrinkled" god of fire, just as harvest of polysaccharides to make pulque from turgid decapitated *Agave* replaced normal flowering which would have resulted in an old wrinkled monocarpic *Agave* (truly a HUEHUEMAGUEY) drained of its nourishment to nurture other life. One needs little imagination to see how the Aztecs must have compared this monocarpic wrinkling with the concept of fire being drained of its energy in supporting life (through domestic heating and cooking). The Aztecs simply came to prefer draining the energy of the Jade Heart (Chalchihuatl) of the Maguey themselves before the Chalchihuatl became dissipated! But Huitzilopochtli had to receive his share. The powers and strengths of the cardinal directions were probably seen as instilled into the central Chalchihuatl as the outstretched *Agave* leaves yielded their energy to the inner heart of the plant, just as Huitzilopochtli, in thankfulness to the Aztecs, ensured that tribute from conquered cities in all directions flowed incessantly to Tenochtitlán, the heart at the center of the empire.

The sacrifice of Chalchihuatl to Huitzilopochtli in the temples legitimized the drinking of pulque by all celebrants in the sacrifice until the wee hours of the morning on a typical sacrificial night, until Quetzalcóatl, the Morning Star, again chased away Tezcatlipoca and the forces of night. The *Agave* goddess MAYAHUEL had 400 nipples to suckle the multitudes. To dedicate the Templo Mayor to Huitzilopochtli, the Tenochca sacrificed 20,000 captives, the entire male population of major districts of Oaxaca. The quantity of pulque involved must have decimated major *Agave* populations as well.

Drinking of pulque during the normal course of the day, rather than when sanctified by a religious occasion, was reserved to

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Huitzilopochtli himself and his corps of hummingbirds representing transformed warriors. Drinking by those not entitled (particularly rebellious youths), could and did result in the death penalty, particularly if the infraction was in public. There was one major exception: a person who had passed the age of 70, male or female, could drink pulque at any time in public or private. Such a person had earned the right to suck the fiery warmth of the Chalchihuatl of the Jade Heart (of the Here and the Now and the Up and the Down and the Center) together with Huitzilopochtli!

After the coming of Cortés, Spanish-speaking people made peace with Mayahuel and taught the citizenry how the Chalchihuatl nectar of *Agave* could be improved in octane to make MEZCAL and TEQUILA, subjects of articles in this issue of *Desert Plants*. These distilled products did not require the heart-rendering activity of old but nevertheless warmed the human spirit as in past revelries.

In reference to the *Agave* sandals given Huitzilopochtli by his poor

mother, interestingly the eventual fall of the Aztec empire to Cortés did indeed radiate out from Tenochtitlán in a pattern similar to that when the empire had been formed. As this occurred, Nahuatl-speaking people did indeed become reduced to a down-to-earth existence and to wearing poor raiment of Magüey. To understand the surging and ebbings of power in pre-Cortés Mexico, we have to realize that the nobility depended on religion to stay in power. There was an intentional confusing of the gods with people who merely bore the names of the gods. For example, several rulers actually bore the god's name Quetzalcóatl. People coming from Aztlán probably did indeed have a leader named Huitzilopochtli. Indeed, even the father of MOTEZUMA I was named HUITZILIHUITL. As shown by bearers of the name Quetzalcóatl, leaders were seen as incarnations of their deity namesakes. It is easy to see how accomplishments and innovations of the leader could be transferred in legend to the deity. But the reverse was true as well. Woe to the Quetzalcóatl in power at the time Venus would be eaten by the sun! Woe to followers of Tezcatlipoca or Huitzilopochtli when the astrology of Quetzalcóatl would again be in favor! Evidence now suggests that Malinche, the female companion and interpreter of Cortés, was thoroughly familiar with Aztec religion and helped Cortés play the role of Quetzalcóatl, probably even advising him on the date to land! Thus, Cortés became a player in a pre-existing political game. Throughout pre-Cortés Mexico, war, politics and religion did indeed follow astrology and the legends of the gods—because people made them do so!—F. S. Crosswhite