Hope and Resilience, Death and the Gods:
An Ontological Analysis of Aztec Human Sacrifice

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Abstract:

This thesis aims to better understand calendrical human sacrifice in the Aztec Empire, ca. 1427–1521 in what is now central Mexico, through a more thorough investigation into Aztec ontology. It is argued that human sacrifice was an act of hope and resilience by the Aztec people in a world that was fragile, and was a ritual that granted life to the natural world and the gods themselves.

This thesis begins with a reassessment of the archaeological and primary ethnohistoric data for Aztec sacrifice. It challenges enduring, historically-derived conceptions surrounding Aztec sacrifice, including: the scale and distribution of human sacrifice in the Aztec Empire; the existence of heart sacrifice and cannibalism; and the association between sacrifice and adult men. It will then examine two types of routine, calendrical sacrifices in the Aztec Empire: the sacrifice of teixiptlahuan *or human gods generally, which occurred almost monthly; and the sacrifice of children* teixiptlahuan *to the rain gods specifically.*

An exploration of the common sacrifices of teixiptlahuan *and the Aztecs' ontological understanding of "self" and "god" reveal that both humans and gods were vulnerable, that "human" and "god" were not mutually exclusive categories, and that the Aztecs were taking an active role in maintaining existence and maintaining the gods through sacrifice in an act of hope. A study of child sacrifice reveals that children were respected and treated like adults in ritual, and that—despite the metaphysical importance of sacrifice—sacrifice could be incredibly difficult for the Aztecs and was consequently a demonstration of resilience. Following these investigations, Aztec sacrifice becomes a practice that is understandable, hopeful, and ordinary, rather than remarkable, extreme and tragic, and thus challenges a centuries-old legacy of racism and dehumanization in Aztec studies.*

Résumé

Cette thèse vise à mieux comprendre le sacrifice humain calendaire dans l'empire aztèque, vers 1427–1521 dans ce qui est maintenant le centre du Mexique, au moyen d'une enquête sur l'ontologie aztèque. On affirme que le sacrifice humain était un acte d'espoir et de résilience du peuple aztèque dans un monde qui était fragile, et que le sacrifice humain était un rituel qui donnait la vie au monde naturel et aux dieux eux-mêmes.

Cette thèse commence avec une réévaluation des données archéologiques et ethnohistoriques primaires pour le sacrifice aztèque. Elle conteste les conceptions durable dérivées de l'histoire sur le sacrifice aztèque, y compris: l'ampleur et la distribution du sacrifice humain dans l'empire aztèque; l'existence du sacrifice du cœur et du cannibalisme; et l'association entre le sacrifice et les hommes adultes. On va examiner ensuite deux types de sacrifices routines et calendaires dans l'empire aztèque: le sacrifice des *teixiptlahuan* ou dieux-humains en général, ce qui se passait presque tous les mois; et le sacrifice des *teixiptlahuan* qui étaient enfants sacrifiait pour les dieux de la pluie spécifiquement.

Une exploration des sacrifices ordinaires de *teixiptlahuan* et des compréhensions ontologiques de "soi" et de "dieu" des aztèques révèle que les humains et les dieux étaient vulnérables, que "humain" et "dieu" n'étaient pas des catégories mutuellement exclusives, et que les aztèques prenaient jouer un rôle actif dans le maintien de l'existence et le maintien des dieux à travers du sacrifice dans un acte d'espoir. Une étude des sacrifices d'enfants révèle que les enfants étaient respectés et traités comme des adultes dans les rituels et que—malgré l'importance métaphysique du sacrifice—les sacrifices pourraient être extrêmement difficiles pour les aztèques et étaient donc une expression de résilience. S'appuyant sur ces enquêtes, le sacrifice aztèque devient une pratique qui est compréhensible, plein d'espoir et ordinaire, plutôt que remarquable, extrême et tragique, et donc conteste un héritage de racisme et de déshumanisation dans les études aztèques.

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Contribution to Original Knowledge/Contribution of Authors

The entirety of this thesis is original scholarship, authored by Frances Koziar. No collaboration was involved in the research, analyses, or writing of this thesis.

CHAPTER 1 — Introduction and Overview

This thesis analyzes Aztec human sacrifice from the perspective of Aztec ontology to argue that human sacrifice was an act of hope and resilience by the Aztec people in face of the fragility of life, their world, and the gods[1] themselves. Drawing upon primary ethnohistoric, archaeological, and secondary literature, it first addresses the archaeological evidence for sacrifice more broadly, and then specifically examines the sacrifices of *teixiptlahuan* or human-gods and the annual sacrifices of children to the rain gods. This introduction will first provide background information on the Aztecs and their cultural understandings, then examine what is meant by ontology and how taking an ontologically respectful approach differs from previous research, and lastly sets up the chapters and structure of this thesis.

Sacrifice or some form of ritual violence has been practiced in most cultures of the world (Klaus and Toyne 2016), but only certain groups—like the Aztecs—are known for it. "Sacrifice" can be defined as killing something or someone in order to have supernatural consequences (Tatlock 2006 in Klaus and Toyne 2016:2), like affecting the balance of existence, or feeding or communicating with the gods. In Mesoamerica, human sacrifice has been practiced at least since the time of the Olmec (ca. 1200–400BCE), who sacrificed children predominantly (Román and Chavez 2006:234), as well as by the Classic Maya and the people of Teotihuacan ((Elson and Smith 2001:171) in the early centuries CE, and the Tarascans (López and López 2008:146), who were neighbours of the Aztecs, among others. Despite this lineage, it is the Aztecs who are most famous for human sacrifice in Mesoamerica, and the strong association between the Aztecs and high levels of human sacrifice has historically been a part of their dehumanization (Dodds Pennock 2008:43), rather than evaluating human sacrifice in its cultural and ontological context.

The Aztecs were the peoples of the Triple-Alliance Empire that existed between 1430 and 1521. Although initially with three capitals, the city of Tenochtitlan had become the dominant capital of the empire by the late 1400s, as well as having dominated its connected "sister-city" of Tlatelolco (Gibson 1971:379–380). Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco, which now lie beneath Mexico City, were both home to the Nahuatl-speaking Mexica people who were ruled by a *tlatoani* ("Speaker") and Cihuacoatl ("Woman snake", also the name of a goddess), as well as three major advisors, with additional power being held by priests, military and judicial council members, and judges (Dodds Pennock 2008:116; Gibson 1971:389).

[1] Used as a gender-neutral word.

Although the Aztecs sacrificed people during times of political upheavals (Carrasco 1999:74), temple dedications, and other important occasions, their calendrical sacrifices are the focus of this thesis. The Aztecs recognized eighteen months of twenty days each, and these calendrical human sacrifices were performed in the capital of Tenochtitlan during sixteen of them (Sahagún 1981:2). These sacrifices were performed for the gods of the Aztec pantheon—which included their patron god Huitzilopochtli, various rain-gods, the Flayed Skin God Xipe Totec, and dozens of others—and usually involved music, dancing, and processions (Carrasco 1999:7). Despite historical estimates in the tens of thousands, these regular sacrifices probably amounted to hundreds of people being killed annually (Section 2.3). Most of these sacrificed people were *teixiptlahuan,* or humans who had become the embodiments of particular gods, and included men, women and children (Bassett 2016; López Austin 1988:376). These sacrificees were also granted particularly honoured afterlives (Dodds Pennock 2008:35).

To the Aztecs, life was fragile, precious, and full of suffering. While it was understood that the world would someday end—just as the previous four ages of existence had ended—at the close of one of their 52-year epochs, most of the time this appears to have been less of a pressing concern than the imminence of one's own death. The fear of death and its associated losses are common in Aztec songs from the mid-1500s (e.g. "*Will nothing remain of my name?…In vain we have come, we have blossomed forth on the earth*" [León-Portilla 1992:221]), as are references to the constant suffering of life (e.g. "*My heart is suffering, friend. This earth is hardship*" [Bierhorst 2009:123]). This suffering was understood to only be alleviated by the few joys of life, which included marriage, sex, children, art, and food (Dodds Pennock 2008:177; López Austin 1988:253), and in some cases was attributed directly to the Aztec gods, who were powerful and respected but not clearly good or evil. Because these gods might, at any point, strike a person with sickness, disability, or death, serving the gods and partaking in religious ritual like sacrifice and auto-sacrifice (self-bloodletting) was important on a personal level for postponing such things (López Austin 1988:66, 381; Román and Chavez 2006:245). As one Aztec poem from the 1500s narrates (in Matos 1995:121–123), the gods would eventually grow bored of you and kill you, but in the meantime you could try to keep them happy:

I gladden your heart, o Giver of Life:
I offer you flowers; I lift songs to you.

That I may give you pleasure even for a short time,
You will tire of it some day.
When you destroy me,
When I must die.
… You will tire of having pleasure,
… The Giver of Life will tire, will feel bored,
And he will destroy us.

Together, these sentiments present some foundational aspects of Aztec ontology—that life was fragile and difficult, and that the fate of the world itself was uncertain—which are crucial to understanding both why the Aztecs found sacrifice to be worthwhile, and what their experience of the practice was.

Ontology is defined here as one's fundamental understanding of existence, including "cultural" as well as "religious" truths, how fundamental concepts like "selfhood", "animacy", and "death" are defined, and how many truths, realities, or worlds are acknowledged to exist. Studying or respecting ontology in scholarly studies is not just studying culture: it is studying its context, a world rather than a worldview, and the reality and truths that existed for a certain group of people (Kohn 2013:10). Taking an ontological approach involves challenging terminology and the assumptions underlying the concepts we use (Descola 2013:325; Kohn 2013:15), concepts like "soul" and "belief" and "person" that come from certain ontologies and certain histories, and allowing for worlds where objects are alive and not personified, where selves are multiple or embodied, and where the ontological divide between human and rock can be smaller than the divide between humans of different cultures (as for the Huron; Robb 2008). An ontological approach encourages deep listening and radical thinking before labelling, and the questioning and challenging of the impact of our language and Western ontology on our understandings and interpretations of indigenous peoples.

The interpretive methodology of this thesis might be placed in a broader lineage of ontological research in archaeology, or research which uses the concept of ontology to delve further into a particular case study (called the "archaeology of social ontology" by Alberti [2016:169]). While it might also be related to the "ontological turn" of socio-cultural anthropology, the ontological turn has happened differently in archaeology (Alberti 2016:164). Questions relating to ontology, particularly in relation to materials rather than people, have been

asked in archaeology for a long time (e.g. Alberti et al 2013; Klaus and Shimada 2016; Olsen 2010), making the ontological turn at the very least a subtler and different shift in archaeology. An increased focus on such questions has, however, been encouraged in the past decade by the influence of anthropologists like Bruno Latour and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (Alberti 2016:164).

This use of the concept of ontology in archaeology has many benefits, not the least of which is that it can help to combat discrimination against indigenous peoples by allowing for the possibility of multiple objective truths and realities. When scholars harbour the inner conviction that there exists a single objective truth to our (singular) reality, it sometimes leads to casual discrimination. The ontological understandings of indigenous people can be, and historically have been, relegated to their naïve or quaint "worldviews" (their view of the world, not how it actually is), rather than treated, for the duration of one's research, as no less true than the beliefs of Western science.

In any move away from discrimination—including in archaeology, but also combatting ableism, racism, classism etc. in the outside world—there is a constantly increasing awareness of how even those advocating against discrimination are practicing it themselves in smaller ways, through language and behavior developed out of that oppressive history. Leaders in Aztec studies and Aztec sacrifice from the 1990s, for instance, were still operating from the assumption of a singular non-indigenous truth, which impacted how they studied the Aztecs. In some cases the effect of this is visible in the words they used, like when understandings of the Aztecs are disagreed with via language that couches it (e.g. "they *thought* this was true"), the use of scare quotes (e.g. they "killed" animate objects [López Luján 2005:200–201]), or the prevailing use of "victim" to refer to sacrificees (a word that implies oppression or ignorance). In other cases, this effect appears in research questions and research goals, like when Furst (1995) set out to find a scientific or empirical observational explanation for everything the Aztecs believed, which prioritized Western science over the possibilities of Aztec ontology being valid, or when López Austin (1988:79,87) repeatedly referred to what was "necessary" for the Aztecs to do in order to keep commoners in line, reducing Aztec religion and belief to mere political coercion rather than allowing for it to be based on cosmological reality. Along the same lines, Carrasco (1999:51) saw the "juxtaposition" of the Aztecs' apparent positive qualities with the practice of human sacrifice as creating an "incongruous" and puzzling "enigma" that needed to be solved,

paralleling Clendinnen's (1991:2) statement that the Aztecs presented a "discrepancy…between social grace and monstrous ritual", both researchers speaking as if sacrifice is an awful practice that requires explanation when practiced by unremarkable and feeling people like the Aztecs.

These scholars, however, brought sacrifice into a larger cosmological, ontological, and political context than previous researchers, and their research was a great improvement on previous Aztec scholarship, which fixated on human sacrifice as a sign of the Aztecs' barbarity and otherness. The Aztecs were first studied by Spanish friars in the 1500s to facilitate their conversion, starting off Aztec research with a solid rejection of their religious beliefs, if also hope for their salvation. In the 1500s and early 1600s, histories and accounts of the Aztecs and their culture were written by various Christian writers of indigenous, Spanish and mixed (*mestizo*) descent, including the influential Florentine Codex, which was compiled by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún from accounts by indigenous informants from Tlatelolco, Tenochtitlan and Texcoco in the late 1570s (Sahagún 0:54–55). Also written at this time were the works of: Fray Durán (1994), whose history of the Aztec Empire is one of the most-cited works for claims of cannibalism; Ixtlilxóchitl, a *mestizo* of Texcocan and Spanish descent who was one of the only scholars granted permission to write about indigenous people under the strict censorship of the time (Koziar and Gomez 2017:38); Tezozómoc, the Nahua grandson of Moctezuma II; and Chimalpahin, a Nahua and minor noble writing for an indigenous audience. Every one of these writers fiercely condemned the practice of human sacrifice (Isaac 2005:7). This attitude toward sacrifice and the Aztecs did change briefly in the late 1800s and early 1900s when archaeology was established as a trained discipline in Mexico, Mexico embraced a *mestizo* national identity, and the *indigenismo* movement fueled studies of the past (Koziar and Gomez 2017:38,41); at that point, the Aztecs were glorified and romanticized (Koziar and Gomez 2017:41), while their practice of human sacrifice was dismissed as unremarkable and unimportant (Bueno 2016:42–43).

Human sacrifice and Aztec religion became an important focus of study again in the 1970s with the (re) discovery of the Aztec's main temple, the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan, and this time it was interpreted primarily in relation to power and state politics. The initial Templo Mayor excavations, led by Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, were set up within a Marxist framework that centred on ideas of ideology, control and repression (Matos 1987:25). However, there are problems with applying Marxism and Marxist terminology to non-Western contexts,

both because using words like "ideology" and "production" that have very particular contexts bring with them assumptions that can lead to false parallels and foggy understandings of indigenous realities (Descola 2013:325), and because words that come from a Marxist critique of capitalism and classism inherently imply a criticism of whatever system they are applied to. With the use of Marxism came a focus on Aztec "ideology" over alternate words by nearly all leading Aztec scholars (e.g. López Austin [1988], Clendinnen [1991], Brumfiel [1998], Carrasco [1999]). The use of this word helped these scholars to elucidate the political, class and power-related aspects and effects of human sacrifice, but with its inherent assumption that the hierarchies and systems of belief in question—as well as states themselves—are wrong or unjust, it did not allow for the validity of Aztec religious thought or a more in-depth exploration of Aztec ontology and experience.

As well as developing political and power-related analyses of sacrifice, scholars in the late 1900s sought cosmological explanations for sacrifice, and some of these works are the precursors to ontological research today. Johanna Broda, Carrasco and Matos (1987), for instance, made cases for symbolic and cosmology-focussed interpretations of sacrifice that situated the Templo Mayor at the axis of the Aztec universe, and recognized that sacrifice could be a debt-payment in the relationship between the Aztecs and their gods which was necessary to prevent the end of the world. Inga Clendinnen (1991) brought Aztec sacrifice down from the state level to a more personal one, including analyzing human sacrifice from the psychological perspective of the person who is sacrificed (1991:92–108) to better understand why ze[2] might be a willing participant in the ritual. More recently, this people-centred analysis of Aztec ritual has been developed by Dodds Pennock (2008), who also combats discriminatory associations between barbarism and sacrifice in Aztec scholarship. Outside of Aztec studies, Klaus and Shimada (2016) have analyzed sacrifice as a reflection of different ontological truths.

This thesis builds off of the work of scholars like Clendinnen and Dodds Pennock, and draws upon analyses of sacrifice that focus on experience and ontology rather than politics and power. Sacrifice is never a one-dimensional act (Klaus and Toyne 2016:2); however, Aztec scholarship has hitherto focussed on sacrifice as a predominantly violent and political act, leaving a need for more study of the personal, the ontological, and the experiential aspects of sacrifice. The focus on these themes is the first deviation of this thesis from (some) previous

[2] Singular gender-neutral pronoun, used throughout this thesis along with "zer".

scholarship. The second is methodological: that it incorporates the archaeological data for Aztec sacrifice, which is often neglected in studies on Aztec ontology and religion (in part because the people doing these studies are often historians rather than archaeologists), and uses it to challenge many assumed details about the Aztec's practice of human sacrifice. Thirdly, and interpretively, this thesis approaches Aztec ontology in a new way, treating it as truth within the Aztec world in order to better understand the actions and experience of the Aztec people. With this approach, I argue that human sacrifice for the Aztecs was an act of maintaining the precarious balance of their existence, of giving death in order to create life for humans, gods, and the natural world, and was an act of hope and resilience by the Aztec people.

Chapter 2 analyzes the archaeological data and challenges various misconceptions about Aztec human sacrifice. Neither cannibalism nor heart sacrifice are archaeologically supported, for instance, and the archaeological data for sacrifice is almost entirely limited to the Aztec capital rather than being spread throughout the empire. Also, although ethnohistoric estimates are typically in the tens of thousands annually (Dodds Pennock 2012), archaeologically the Aztecs appear to only have sacrificed hundreds of people annually.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine the ontological basis and significance for calendrical sacrifices. Chapter 3 analyzes the human "life-complex", comprised of the self or *teyolia*, and the embodied *tonalli* and *ihiyotl*, to reveal that in the very structure of the human life-complex is a fragility which mirrors that of the Aztec world and unites all living things. The human self and life-complex are then contrasted with that of the Aztec *teteo* or gods in Chapter 4. These *teteo* are argued to have been entities which were more physical than humans, residing on the physical plane and yet not quite "alive", and who made up all of the "natural" forces and entities (like rain and corn) upon which the Aztecs depended. How these two entities of human and *teteo* met in the existence of *teixiptlahuan* or human-gods—who defied any ontological barrier between "human" and "god"—is then analyzed. In a cyclical and interdependent relationship wherein humans and gods both depended on one another, the sacrifices of *teixiptlahuan* enabled the gods to die and be reborn and re-strengthened.

Chapter 5 presents a particular type of *teixiptlahuan* sacrifice: that of children sacrificed to the rain gods. The first part of Chapter 5 analyzes the archaeological data for these sacrifices to reveal that children were common sacrificees, that male and sick children were sacrificed most frequently to the rain gods, and that rain-god sacrifices could vary substantially in how

sacrificees were chosen, including involving adults. The second half of Chapter 5 examines the Aztecs understanding of "child" and "childhood", and exposes how children had substantial political and religious significance within Aztec culture, much like adults did. Ethnohistorically, these sacrifices are also described as being very difficult for the Aztec people, helping to bring home the fact that for the Aztecs, despite the importance of these rituals, human sacrifice could be incredibly difficult emotionally, and was thus an expression of human resilience.

Without taking into account Aztec ontology, human sacrifice can be interpreted as the result of an oppressive ideology, as a predominantly violent act, or at best as a tragedy (because the Aztecs mistakenly thought they had to kill people), but from an Aztec perspective, sacrifice was far more than this. Going a step further from the writings of the 1990's, the Aztecs were not human despite sacrifice, they were human *because* of sacrifice, for it is in the practice of sacrifice that we can see their fierce and ordinary will to live, ability to love, and struggle to handle life's hardships. Through an analysis of particular elements of Aztec ontology, including notions of the "self", the "gods", the "natural" world, and "death" itself, this thesis presents a new understanding of Aztec sacrifice and the Aztec people wherein sacrifice was a difficult task but one the Aztecs deemed of utmost importance. It was an act of hope for the world, the difficult offering of few for the sake of many, and the completion of a cycle of power between humans and their world. It was critical for providing life to the gods, and for maintaining the fragile equilibrium of existence itself.

CHAPTER 2 — Archaeological Data

Analyzing the archaeological data before exploring Aztec ontology and Aztec sacrifice in depth is important because it can help to reveal various misconceptions and unfounded views about the Aztecs and their practice of ritual sacrifice. The archaeological data on the Aztecs is ever-expanding, and some of these misconceptions have only been able to be challenged by archaeological findings that didn't exist until recent decades, while others have arisen due to a lack of attention being paid to the archaeological data in favour of colonial claims. In the case of the latter, the fact that in-depth analyses of Aztec ontology usually come from ethnohistorians and not archaeologists could be part of the problem, as well as a lack of communication between disciplines. Another issue is the making of geographic and temporal overgeneralizations, where

claims are made about the practice or customs of all of Mesoamerica, for instance, even after a lack of evidence has been discussed in the Aztec case (e.g. López Austin 1988:382 and Pijoan and Mansilla 1997:236 regarding cannibalism). However, despite the limits of archaeology to explore some of the complexities of ontology, archaeological information is a critical resource for understanding Aztec sacrifice, and through it, the Aztec people.

The ethnohistoric sources present various opinions about Aztec sacrifice. For instance, they say that the Aztecs sacrificed thousands to tens of thousands of people annually, ranging from Cortes' estimate of 3–4k/year (Cortés 1971:36) to Gomara's estimate of 50k/year (in Dodds Pennock 2012:279), and that it was practiced throughout the Aztec Empire and among their neighbours (Dodds Pennock 2012:286; Márquez et al 2002:334). They also suggest that heart sacrifice was the most common form of sacrifice, whereby a sacrificee died by having zer heart torn out. Heart sacrifice is depicted or mentioned in the vast majority of colonial sources, including in Codex Magliabechiano (Boone and Nuttal 1983:70), Cortés's letters (1971:35), and Díaz del Castillo's work (1963:229), as well as in the Florentine Codex, where it is specifically mentioned as being the manner of sacrifice for half of the 16 monthly (out of 18 months) sacrifices of the year (Sahagún 1981:2). Ritual cannibalism is generally perceived to have happened alongside these sacrifices, and is mentioned in many sources including in the Florentine Codex (e.g. Sahagún 1981:2:54), the *Relaciones Geográficas* (Acuña 1987:35,64), by Díaz del Castillo (1963:229), and by Durán (e.g. 1964:141). After being sacrificed, the parts of the bodies that weren't eaten were said to have been cremated, as this was the treatment for anyone who died except for still-nursing children and those who died of water-related illnesses or in rain-god sacrifices (who were buried; Dodds Pennock 2008:172; López Luján 2005:176). Heads were frequently saved and put onto "skull" racks (a misnomer, as they would have been decaying heads at the time), and Sahagún mentions five of these racks, at least a few of which appear to have been located in Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco (e.g. Sahagún 1981:2:180,183,189).

Sacrifices are often thought to have been of male warriors, though the Florentine Codex mentions women being sacrificed during more than half of the calendrical sacrifices where he specifies sex (Sahagún 1981:3:–). Children are depicted being raised in the Codex Mendoza (Berdan and Anawalt 1992:157–159 [folio 58–59r]) and are described as partaking in rituals (Sahagún 1981:2:203), but they are rarely described as being sacrificed themselves (one exception: Sahagún 1981:2:47), apart from during the annual rain-god sacrifices. These

sacrifices are said to have happened in the spring of each year to various rain gods, and are described as primarily or exclusively involving young child sacrificees, who were *teixiptlahuan* of the rain gods (López Luján 2005:153; Román and Chavez 2006: 244–245). Although these child sacrificees may have been from the Mexica ethnic group (Clendinnen 1991:98), most sacrificees weren't, and either came from tributary provinces of the Aztecs—including from well-integrated states and from those who tried to break free of the empire—and from battles with enemy states (Clendinnen 1991:90–91, 97).

Many of these claims are either not supported or directly contradicted by the archaeological data. For instance, the Aztecs appear to have sacrificed far fewer people than the ethnohistoric sources predict, women and children were unremarkably regular sacrificees, the Aztecs may not have practiced heart sacrifice or cannibalism at all or ever routinely sacrificed people outside of their capital, and cremation appears to be the means of disposing of the dead in only a tiny minority of cases. This chapter will present this opposing information, as well as new information relating to Aztec sacrifice and the treatment of the dead. Section 2.1 will assess the general archaeological data pertaining to Aztec human remains, including presenting a summary of all human remains found in the empire and the remains of children and women specifically. Section 2.2 will assess potential post-mortem body treatment of the dead, including examining evidence for cannibalism and cremation, as well as reassessing the data for heart sacrifice (the only evidence for which is currently port-mortem). Section 2.3 will finish by recalculating the annual frequency of Aztec sacrifice based on the skull tower that is currently being excavated in Mexico City to come up with an annual sacrifice estimate of about 80–1800 people for the empire, and then explore the ontological significance of the sheer number of disembodied skulls found archaeologically.

2.1 — Sacrificial and Human Remains.

This section will present the human remains found to date in the Aztec Empire, and assess the data for the sacrifice of children and women. It presents a current MNI (minimum number of individuals) of 1892 people excavated in the Aztec Empire, 36% of whom were children, and, from among the sexed adults, 36% of whom were female.

First, the general numbers for human remains found to date—many of which are probably sacrificial—are presented in Tables 1.1–1.3. Most of these remains have either been

found near/in/with temples or are almost certainly sacrificial, like the mass grave of dismembered and beheaded human remains at Teopanzolco. However, it is difficult to conclusively distinguish whether human remains are sacrificial, and for that reason remains that are probably funerary are also included in this table. The funerary remains are also important because they yield information on Aztec death practices more generally—including the frequency of cremation—which has implications for the ontological categories of Aztec selfhood and embodiment as discussed in Chapter 3. Not all of the archaeological data are accessible, and some of these sites, like the skull tower of Tenochtitlan, are still being excavated, so this information is far from complete.

Table 1.1 Summary of Human Remains from Tenochtitlan

Site	Context, Deposit	Minimum Number of Individuals (MNI)
Tenochtitlan[a]	Templo Mayor Precinct; Tlaloc Rain-God Sacrifice	42
Tenochtitlan[b]	Templo Mayor Precinct; Huitzilopochtli Child	1
Tenochtitlan[c]	Templo Mayor Precinct; All Other Deposits	119
Tenochtitlan[d]	Metropolitan Cathedral; Rain-God Sacrifice	20
Tenochtitlan[e]	Metropolitan Cathedral; Other	10
Tenochtitlan[f]	Skull Tower	676
Tenochtitlan[g]	Palacio Nacional	2
Tenochtitlan[H]	Ball Game Court	32
Total		**902**

[a] Matos 1987:45

[b] López Austin and López Luján 2008:140

[c] CBC 2012; López Austin and López Luján 2008:140; López Luhan 2005:172–174; Solari 2008:146

[d] Rodríguez-Fernández et al 1999:663

[e] Batres 1902:29–43

[f] BBC 2017

[g] Román and Rodríguez 1997:216

[H] INAH 2017

Table 1.2 Summary of Human Remains from Tlatelolco

Site	Context, Deposit	Minimum Number of Individuals (MNI)
Tlatelolco[a]	Skull Rack	170
Tlatelolco[b]	Ehecatl Temple; Rain-God Sacrifice	43
Tlatelolco[c]	Burial 14	153
Tlatelolco[d]	Burial 72	101
Tlatelolco[e]	Other Burials	399
Tlatelolco[f]	Plaza de Santiago	8
Total		**874**

[a] Pijoan and Mansilla 1997:222
[b] Cruz et al 2008:519
[c] Pijoan and Mansilla 2004:77
[d] Argáez et al 2011:2980
[e] Argáez et al 2011:2980
[f] Chavez 2007:144

Table 1.3 Human Remains from Other Sites

Site	Context, Deposit	Minimum Number of Individuals (MNI)
Tenayuca[a]	Urns and Burials	9
Tenayuca[b]	Fragments	1
Teopanzolco[c]	Burial	90
Zultépec-Tecoaque[d]	Skull Rack	14
Total		**114**

[a] Noguera 1935:163–169
[b] Noguera 1933:277
[c] Lagunas and Serrano 1972:432
[d] Jarquín and Martínez 2017:75

Most of the Aztec human remains we have come from the pre-Hispanic cities of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco, both of which are now beneath modern-day Mexico City: 1786 out of 1892 total (MNI) human remains from the empire come from the dual capital. The largest single deposit is the *Huei Tzompantli* skull tower of Tenochtitlan at the border of the Templo Mayor Precinct (which was the great courtyard that housed the Templo Mayor and many other important buildings), yielding 676 skulls as of 2017 (BBC News 2017). This is one of three skull

racks found, in addition to those at Tlatelolco and Zultépec-Tecoaque (to the northeast of the capital), and isolated skulls are also found in various deposits within the Templo Mayor Precinct, including in offerings within the Templo Mayor itself.

Excluding the *Huei Tzompantli*, the greater site of Tlatelolco offers the most human remains by far, with a conservative MNI of 874 (totals for most of the burials couldn't be found). This includes more than 400 single and multiple burials (Argáez et al 2011:2980), two of which (Burials 14 and 72) exceed 100 individuals and are thus quite plausibly sacrificial, in addition to its own skull rack. Tlatelolco is also where a mixed deposit of children and adults were found sacrificed to one of the rain gods: the wind god Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl. Children are also found sacrificed to rain gods in one Templo Mayor offering associated with Tlaloc or Tlalocan-tecuhtli[3], and at one of the Metropolitan Cathedral sites. Table 2 will present these findings in more detail, in addition to the other deposits containing children.

A note on distribution. The archaeological data offers little support for the practice of human sacrifice outside of the Aztec capital. This opposes the claims of some ethnohistoric sources that suggest human sacrifice happened at every city temple in the empire (e.g. Cortés 1971:36), and the general assumption made by many scholars that sacrifice was commonly practiced in the (Aztec and non) city-states of Central Mexico and Mesoamerica more broadly (e.g. Dodds Pennock 2012:286; Márquez et al 2002:334), creating the expectation that the enemies of the Aztecs would sacrifice Aztec warriors just as the Aztecs sacrificed theirs (López and López 2008:147). However, while there is archaeological data for sacrifice from various earlier sites in Mesoamerica (e.g. Morehart et al 2012), the only clear instance of sacrifice outside of Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco is a single deposit at the site of Teopanzolco to the southern end of the empire. This deposit happens to coincide with a visit of the Mexica military to the region, described by indigenous historian Chimalpahin, and sacrifices made by the *tlatoani* Ahuitzotl (Lagunas and Serrano 1972:433). Only two other sites yield any kind of Aztec human remains apart from Teopanzolco: Tenayuca, now a northern suburb of Mexico City, and Zultépec-Tecoaque. The remains at Tenayuca, found in single and double burials and funerary

[3] This god is usually referred to as "Tlaloc", and will be referred to such in this thesis. However, "Tlaloc" (or *tlaloque*) is a general noun: there were many Tlalocs, who were smaller rain gods or "deity helpers". "Tecuhtli", meaning "lord/lady", helps specify that this Tlaloc was one (of two) of the principal rain gods who ruled over the realm of Tlalocan. This name, suggested by López Austin (1988:57), is in line with the name "Mictlantecuhtli" who is lord of the lower world of Mictlan.

urns, are probably not sacrificial, and those on the skull rack of Zultépec-Tecoaque, which normally would have been sacrificial, are more likely to have come from the wars leading to the fall of Tenochtitlan in 1521.

Together, these findings suggest that human sacrifice was rare outside of Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco. Although there is an information bias, both archaeologically and ethnohistorically, toward the capital, the differences between it and the rest of the empire are supported by patchy references to sacrifice throughout the empire in the *Relaciones Geográficas*[4] (a census questionnaire conducted between 1577 and 1586 throughout New Spain) and by differences observed in other archaeological deposits[5] between the capital and hinterland. These differences are further supported by the facts that in many ways Tenochtitlan was a very atypical Aztec city (Smith 2008:3) and conquered city-states were allowed a fair amount of autonomy after being incorporated into the empire (Elson and Smith 2001:157), which may have meant that partaking in human sacrifice was not a requirement of conquered peoples.

2.12 — Women and Children

Child/subadult remains. To summarize the archaeological data for child sacrifices (in advance of a more in-depth exploration of the demographics and health profiles of rain-god children in Section 5.1), nearly two hundred children or subadults have been found in Tenochtitlan (including the skull tower, but numbers are not yet available), Tlatelolco and Teopanzolco, nearly all of them in contexts that also include adult remains. Table 2 presents all of the contexts that include child remains; of the 530 remains that specified the proportion of adults to children, including a couple all-adult contexts not included in Table 2, 36% were children. Allowing for this percentage to be skewed by insufficient data, a broader range of 15–50% sacrificees being children is proposed. For comparison purposes, children would have made

[4] In the *Relaciones Geográficas*, descendants of the central region of the empire claimed that sacrifice was only practiced in 50% of their cities (Isaac 2002:206), suggesting many city-states in the region did not share in the practices of the Aztec capital.

[5] The archaeologists Elson and Smith (2001) note that a number of assemblages from New Fire Ceremonies, which happened at the close of each 52-year epoch, have been found from the same years in various places in the empire, but that these (sacrifice-free) deposits are some of the only instances of state ritual described in the ethnohistoric sources that have been found outside of Tenochtitlan (169). Brumfiel's (1999) analysis of ceramics also suggests that the lifeways and values of the Aztec capital were not identical to those of the hinterlands.

up about half of the population (Ardren 2006:10), which suggests that proportionally, they were being sacrificed slightly less frequently than adults.

Table 2. Child Remains: Number and Percentages from All Sites Containing Children

Site	Context, Deposit	Deposit MNI	Number of Adults	Percentage of Adults	Number of Children	Percentage of Children
Tenochtitlan[a]	Templo Mayor Precinct; Tlaloc Rain-God Sacrifice	42	0	0%	42	100%
Tenochtitlan[b]	Templo Mayor Precinct; Huitzilopochtli Child	1	0	0%	1	100%
Tenochtitlan[c]	Templo Mayor Precinct; All Other Deposits	119	116	97%	3	3%
Tenochtitlan[d]	Metropolitan Cathedral; Rain-God Sacrifice	20	0	0%	20	100%
Tenochtitlan[e]	Metropolitan Cathedral; Other	10	6	60%	4	40%
Tenochtitlan[f]	Skull Tower	676	N/A	--	N/A	--
Tenochtitlan[g]	Palacio Nacional	2	1	50%	1	50%
Tenochtitlan[H]	Ball Game Court	32	0	0%	32	100%
Subtotal			**123**	**54%**	**103**	**46%**
Tlatelolco[I]	Ehecatl Temple; Rain-God Sacrifice	43	6	14%	37	86%
Tlatelolco[J]	Burial 14	153	150	98%	3	2%
Subtotal			**156**	**80%**	**40**	**20%**
Teopanzolco[k]	Burial	90	44	49%	46	51%
Subtotal			**44**	**49%**	**46**	**51%**
Total			**323**	**63%**	**189**	**37%**

[a] Matos Moctezuma 1987:45
[b] López Austin and López Luján 2008:140
[c] CBC 2012
[d] Rodríguez-Fernández et al 1999:663
[e] Batres 1902:29–43
[f] Matos, Barrera and Vázquez 2017: 56
[g] Roman and Rodríguez 1997:216
[H] INAH 2017
[I] Cruz et al 2008:519
[J] Pijoan and Mansilla 2004:78
[k] Lagunas and Serrano 1972:432

This percentage of 15–50% children is markedly higher than what can be gleaned from the Florentine Codex, where Sahagún only expressly describes child[6] sacrifice in two contexts: one is a passing mention to child captives being sacrificed during Tlacaxipehualiztli, an annual festival celebrating the Flayed Skin God Xipe Totec (no number given; Sahagún 1981:2:47); and the other is in reference to rain-god sacrifices that happened during four months of the year (the text specifies that 7 died in the first month; Sahagún 1981:2:44**)**. From these numbers, the percentage of children sacrificed based on the Florentine Codex[7] is only about 5–20%

The Florentine Codex hardly references child sacrifice outside of rain-god sacrifices, but archaeologically, these other sacrifices comprise nearly half of the child remains we have, found in more than half a dozen deposits. Among those deposits, only the sacrifice of a child to Huitzilopochtli in the Templo Mayor is referenced in an ethnohistoric source (the *Relación* of *Chimalhuacan Atoyac;* Acuña 1987:164).

Of particular note is the "Ball Game Court" sacrifice mentioned in Table 2, where the articulated neck vertebra of 32 children were found under the stairs leading up to the Tenochtitlan ball court (INAH 2017). In addition to being as large as the rain-god sacrifices, this deposit is of significance for only yielding necks. Rather than being left over from dismemberment and decapitation, these necks appear to have been chosen for some particular significance—one that is not mentioned ethnohistorically[8]. One possible reason for the selection of necks is that the neck could have been associated with breath, and the breath or *ihiyotl* was a key entity in the Aztec life-complex (Section 3.4).

Female remains. Overall, females represent 35.7% of the sexed adult human remains (n=322; Table 3), and female skulls have been found on all three head racks (*tzompantli*), as well as comprising a minority of the isolated skulls found in Templo Mayor offerings (numbers unavailable and not included in Table 3; López and López 2008:140). This plausibly fits with the claims of the Florentine Codex for frequency of female sacrifice. Out of the rituals that happened

[6] What is meant in the Florentine Codex by "child" is never actually made explicit. Child may not refer to the indigenous understanding of people under thirteen.

[7] About 200-600 is used for the base number here, as derived from Dodds Pennock's (2012) research and the Florentine Codex, and as presented in Section 2.3

[8] The only reference to the neck that I've found is a description in the Florentine Codex of some participants (during the rites of Atemoztli) only washing their necks (Sahagún 1981:2:151). Sahagún *does* describe the sacrifices of slaves taking place in the ball court during Panquetzaliztli, but he does not mention them being children or having their necks cut out (1981:2:145).

during each of the Aztecs' 18 months, 2 didn't involve sacrifice, 5 don't specify the sex of the people who were sacrificed (or the pronoun "he" was used casually), 5 specified women, 2 specified men, and 4 specified both (Sahagún 1981:3:--). From this, one would anticipate that mixed-sex deposits would be fairly common, which is true, and that women would present at least half of sacrificees. While the latter is not true, the number of sacrificees varied month to month, potentially allowing for the 35.7% of females found archaeologically to fit within the range of the codex's claim.

The implications of more than a third of sexed remains being female is that while sacrifice may have been dominated to some degree by adult men, women (and children) were common enough sacrificees that they would have been entirely unremarkable. Curiously, at present there are no deposits involving multiple people that are exclusively male, though Cruz et al (2008:524), disagreeing with Román and Chavez (2006:243), think it is a possibility for the Ehecatl Temple sacrifice. Instead, nearly every deposit contains both men and women, with women almost always comprising a minority of remains. This would suggest that no aspect or domain of sacrifice—from the skull racks to child sacrifices to mixed dismembered burials—were seen to be exclusively male. Ergo, sacrifice should not be associated with men, and was something that permeated Aztec culture even more deeply for involving all demographics of people. Why more men then women were sacrificed is a mystery, though it could had been related to the relative frequency of men and women in the population from different mortality rates, the frequency with which men and women (and children) were captured in or because of war, and the frequency with which men and women became collared slaves, who could also be sacrificed.

Table 3. Adult Female Remains: Number and Percentages From All Sites With Sexed Adults

Site	Context, Deposit	Deposit MNI[o]	Number of Adults	Number of Sexed Adults	Percentage of Adults Sexed	Number of Females	Percentage of Females	Percentage of Males
Tenochtitlan[a]	Templo Mayor Precinct; All Other Deposits	119	119	2	2%	2	100%	0%
Tenochtitlan[b]	Skull Tower	676	N/A	—	—	—	—	—
Subtotal				**2**	**2%**	**2**	**100.0%**	**0.0%**
Tlatelolco[c]	Skull Rack	170	170	100	59%	43	43%	57%
Tlatelolco[d]	Ehecatl Temple; Rain-God Sacrifice	43	6	6	100%	0	0%	100%
Tlatelolco[e]	Burial 14	153	150	147	98%	38	26%	74%
Subtotal				**253**	**78%**	**81**	**32.0%**	**68.0%**
Tenayuca[f]	Urns and Burials	9	6[o]	2	33%	2	100%	0%
Teopanzolco[g]	Burial	90	44	51[oo]	100%	23	45%	55%
Zultépec-Tecoaque[H]	Skull Rack	14	14	14	100%	7	50%	50%
Subtotal				**67**	**94%**	**32**	**47.8%**	**52.2%**
Total				**322**	**63%**	**115**	**35.7%**	**64.3%**

[o]Note: The 3 sets of remains found in urns are not counted here

[oo]Note: The percentages of males and females for Teopanzolco is based on an N of 51, not 44, because 7 teenagers were lumped in with the sexing

[a] CBC 2012; López Luján 2005:174

[b] BBC 2017

[c] Pijoan and Mansilla 1997:222

[d] Cruz et al 2008:519,524

[e] Pijoan and Mansilla 2004:78

[f] Noguera 1935:167

[g] Lagunas and Serrano 1972:432 (including a handful of teenagers)

[H] Jarquín and Martínez 2017:75

2.2 — Post-Mortem Body Treatment: Heart Sacrifice; Cremation; and Cannibalism

Three post-mortem body treatments advocated for by historical sources and some current scholarship are largely unsupported archaeologically, or unsupported to the degree that the historical sources predict. The first of these is heart sacrifice, which is not supported as a peri-mortem practice archaeologically but for which a similar post-mortem variant may have occurred. The second is cremation, argued to be the Aztec's predominant method of disposing of bodies, which is only supported archaeologically as a very rare occurrence. Third is the practice of cannibalism, for which, at present, there is no archaeological support.

Heart Sacrifice. Although it is true that some methods of heart extraction might not, or not always, leave marks on the skeleton (Tiesler and Cucina 2006:505), there is no conclusive archaeological data supporting the Aztecs' practice of heart sacrifice; this, despite the frequent references to heart sacrifice in historical sources (Boone and Nuttal 1983:70; Cortés 1971:35; Díaz del Castillo 1963:229) and the continuing belief of many scholars that it was a common practice of the Aztecs (Carrasco and Sessions 2011:198; Pijoan and Mansilla 2004:69), and even their primary method of sacrificing humans (Solari 2008:158). There is one potential heart sacrifice of a child sacrificed to the Mexica's patron god Huitzilopochtli found at the Templo Mayor (López and López 2008:140) which would match one account from the *Relaciones*[9], with cut marks made to the inside of the ribs (Chavez Balseras 2007:16), but no conclusive data for this offering are available. There have also been claims of heart sacrifice found in Burial 14 at Tlatelolco: in a secondary burial containing at least 153 individuals (though many fewer torsos), 57 of them have their sternums split open with a sharp tool (Pijoan and Mansilla 2004:79). However, Tiesler and Cucina (2006:495) have shown that these cuts were not the cause of death, and were made from both the front and the back, indicating post-mortem cutting.

The latter finding suggests that, while the practice of heart sacrifice may not have happened, something similar may have occurred post-mortem. The colonial depictions of heart sacrifice may relate to the occasional practice of cutting out the heart, or otherwise cutting open

[9] From the *Relación of Chimalhuacan Atoyac*: "they carried a small child to the (said) temple and delivered it to the (said) Tlenamacas (as priests), and, invoking the Devil, sacrificed the child by taking his heart out alive, opening his breasts with a knife that for this purpose had a large blade, and they offered the heart and blood to the (said) idol Huitzilopochtli" (Acuña 1987:164, trans. by author). Spanish (original): "Hacian llevar un niño pequeño al dicho templo y lo entregaban a los dichos Tlenamacas, como sacerdotes, e, invocando el Demonio, sacrificaban al niño sacandole vivo el corazón, abriendole los pechos con una navaja que para este efecto tenían a manera de cuchilla grande, y el corazón y sangre lo ofrecian al dicho ídolo Huitzilopochtli."

the chest, shortly after death, something which may have been related to funerary rituals of those who died. The *teyolia* or self (Section 3.3), which resided in the chest until after death, could have been released in a ritual that included cutting open the chest, rather than the cremation normally described (e.g. Carrasco and Sessions 2011:127) as part of this release. This would have both ontological and experiential implications. Ontologically, the self could not have been embodied, at least after death, if the heart was cut out without harming the person. Experientially, death via some other means than heart sacrifice was almost certainly less damaging to the body and less forceful, and thus less violent (if that word is defined as doing physical damage, using physical force or seeming to be about to), which would have changed how sacrifice was viewed by both spectators and practitioners. This could help enforce the idea for the Aztecs that violence itself and any theatrical display of sacrifice were secondary to its ontological purpose.

Cremation. Ixtlilxóchitl, Sahagún, and another friar Torquemada, all describe cremation as the predominant way the Aztecs handled dead bodies (including those of almost all sacrificees), with only those going to the rain gods' realm of Tlalocan and infants that went to Chichihualcuauhco as exceptions (Noguera 1935:163; López Luján 2005:176), and more generally textual sources argue for cremation being common in the late Postclassic period in Mesoamerica (Chavez 2007:143). However, archaeologically—and fitting with the fact that Spanish accounts like Cortes' do not mention cremation pyres for sacrificed people (in Clendinnen 1991:91)—cremated remains are found very rarely in comparison to remains that haven't been cremated.

Cremation is well supported archaeologically as more generally taking place in pre-Hispanic Mexico (Chavez 2007:138), and as occurring in the late Postclassic (López Luján 2005:176), but the Aztec-specific data are lacking. Cremated or partially cremated remains have been found at Tenayuca (in 3 pots and 3 single burials; Chavez 2007:144; Noguera 1935:163–165), the Templo Mayor[10] (9 sets of ashes, including 7 in urns; López Luján 2005:172), and at Tlatelolco (an unspecified number of funerary urns; Chavez 2007:144). Chavez (2007:144) also mentions a deposit where (partially) cremated bones are found in a ritual context, with an MNI

[10] Including in the oldest offering with human remains found at the Templo Mayor, from Phase 2 (circa 1390) (Moctezuma 1987:40).

of 8 based on humeral distal epiphyses. However, all of these comprise a mere 1.2% of the remains (MNI) presented in Tables 1.1–1.3.

While this low proportion of cremated remains might be partially due to them being harder to find or preserving more poorly than other remains, these findings do not support ethnohistoric claims. This 1% might fit if only Aztec elites were cremated, something supported to a degree by the fact that accounts like those compiled in the Florentine Codex are biased toward the capital city and elites (Clendinnen 1991:279; Sahagún:0:54–55) but while the Maya only cremated the wealthy (López Luján 2005:380), among the Aztecs everyone was said to have been cremated regardless of status. This could suggest that these accounts were far more elite-biased than suspected, or that they were simply wrong on this account, perhaps because what happened after a person was sacrificed mattered less to colonial writers than the sacrifice itself.

That the Aztecs appeared to have almost never cremated their dead has implications for their ontology relating to death, the self, and the body. It means that cremation was not necessary to release the self, and removes any symbolism connecting the fire of cremation to going to the realm of the sun after a sacrificial death (Carrasco and Sessions 2011:127–128), or seeing that burning as a mirror of the fire that gave strength to a child and zer *tonalli* (Chapter 3) after birth (López Austin 1988:211). It would also affect how long the two embodied elements of the life-complex would survive for past the time when the self left the body. It might also suggest that there were certain advantages or powers associated with keeping a body intact.

Cannibalism. The practice of Aztec cannibalism is still assumed or argued to be fact by many Aztec scholars today (e.g. Jarquín and Martínez 2017:76; Sáez 2009; Solari 2008:162), even including a few archaeologists who are aware of the express lack of data for Aztec cannibalism (Pijoan and Mansilla 1997:236), based largely on the claims of Sahagún and Durán. Like the beliefs that the Aztecs practiced heart sacrifice and sacrificed tens of thousands of people annually, the unsupported claim of Aztec cannibalism derives from an overly trustful reading of the ethnohistoric sources. This misconception has substantially impacted our understanding of Aztec ontology because of the numerous publications that have discussed *why* the Aztecs practiced cannibalism (e.g. Harner 1977; Jarquín and Martínez 2017:76; López Austin 1988:382; Ortiz de Montellano 1978).

There is no archaeological data for anything that even vaguely resembles Aztec cannibalism. A few reports have presented data for cannibalism in earlier cultures in Mesoamerica (e.g. Pijoan and Mansilla 1997; Pijoan et al. 2007) but any connection to the Aztecs has only been assumed either because of a supposed cultural continuity, or as a conflation of sacrifice with cannibalism. (Contributing to the confusion, in at least two publications, Pijoan and Mansilla's 1997 chapter has been mis-cited for containing archaeological evidence for Aztec cannibalism when it only found evidence for cannibalism at non-Aztec sites and evidence for Aztec *sacrifice* at Tlatelolco.) Despite a lack of archaeological data, López Austin (1988:382) claimed that the skeletal evidence had proved "beyond a doubt" that cannibalism and sacrifice existed in early Mesoamerica, going on to cite only Durán in his discussion of the cannibalism part, and Ortiz de Montellano (1978) wrote that "there is no doubt that ritual cannibalism took place in Central Mexico. The extent of this sacrifice and the proportion of the population eaten is more debatable" (615), citing Sahagún and Durán. In both cases sacrifice and cannibalism seem to be assumed to go together even if the data only support the former, and the claim of cannibalism ultimately comes from Sahagún and Durán.

Even ignoring the archaeological data, that these claims come from Sahagún and Durán is seriously problematized by the fact that neither of them agree on even a single instance of Aztec cannibalism. Sahagún makes a handful of claims of cannibalism (1981:0:57, 1:42, 2:24, 2:54), all but one of which are limited to a single phrase, including some which he himself contradicts. His most convincing claim, of cannibalism during the festival of Tlacaxipehualiztli (Sahagún 1981:2:54), is not mentioned by Durán in his pages of description about this festival (Durán 1964:110–113), and thus not mentioned by the friar who offers the most numerous and sensational accounts of Aztec cannibalism including that the Aztecs sold human meat in the market because they liked its taste (Durán 1964:141; Isaac 2005:5). Both López Austin (1988:382) and Ortiz de Montellano (1978:616) note expressly that both Sahagún and Durán fabricated at least some of their writings on cannibalism.

The claim of cannibalism is further weakened by other colonial sources. For instance, the two codices that depict cannibalism most famously in a couple pictures, Codex Magliabechiano and Tudela (which are based on the same earlier manuscript), both show evidence of substantial Christian modifications and rely heavily on their Spanish notations for interpretation (Boone and Nuttal 1983:28,208; Klein 2000:4). The collection of *Relaciones Geográficas*, though presenting

some evidence for cannibalism in (again) passing phrases, present a clear majority that deny that cannibalism happened in the core regions of the empire (Isaac 2002:206). And third, Isaac (2005) demonstrates that historical sources written by indigenous Nahua peoples, in contrast to the writings of Spaniards, do not support cannibalism being practiced; at best, they mention a few one-off times of the Aztecs tricking another group into cannibalism, which is portrayed as a horrifying practice (Isaac 2005:2–3).

The middle source, the *Relaciones Geográficas,* is the most conflicted on the topic of cannibalism. In the *Relaciones*, a 50-question questionnaire sent out to all of the conquered areas of New Spain between 1577 and 1586 and filled out by a local Spanish official, two questions regarding past practices and beliefs (that did not mention cannibalism specifically) were asked of the indigenous elders of the city; from the central region of the Aztec Empire (México), 41% (of thirty-four questionnaires) attest that they practiced cannibalism in pre-Hispanic times (Isaac 2002:204, 206). These accounts would have been impacted by the time that had lapsed since the Spanish invasion, by the fact that most of the indigenous informants would have had a syncretic indigenous-Catholic belief system by that time which would have involved the condemnation of some pre-Hispanic practices (Isaac 2005:218), by the knowledge that a claim of cannibalism must have religious/social/political consequences, and by the possible modification of indigenous answers by the Spanish officials, who appear, in some cases, to have to have asked direct questions (that they weren't supposed to) about whether the indigenous people practiced cannibalism (e.g. Acuña 1987:87,115). It is also possible, given that the elders of 1580 would have been children in 1521 and would have more memories of the colonial period and the stereotypes of their people than they would of the Aztec Empire, that the indigenous people were genuinely confused about whether or not their people had practiced cannibalism. In modern-day psychological studies, false information has been shown to be able to easily cause the creation of false memories or the modification of existing ones in a short period of time (Strange et al. 2008:588; Wade et al. 2010:899–900), in experiments that are far less powerful than living an entire lifetime of listening to a conviction of cannibalism. Although the ambiguously high 41% might suggest cannibalism was practiced in some regions of the Aztec Empire, it is also true that 41% of people believing in cannibalism could be explained solely based on the impacts of stereotyping and the creation of false memories: averaging across 13 laboratory studies, false memories arose in 37% of adults (Strange et al 2008:588). Although more conflicted than the

other sources, the *Relaciones* present no clear support of cannibalism, and still present a clear majority denying its practice.

At present, the archaeological data for cannibalism is non-existent, and the ethnohistoric evidence is unconvincing, though with some ambiguity from the *Relaciones.* In addition to most sources denying its routine practice, the theory of Aztec cannibalism is strongly weakened by the fact that most claims of cannibalism throughout the *Relaciones* (Isaac 2005:207), in the Florentine Codex (Sáez 2009:34; Sahagún 1981:0:57, 1:42, 2:24), and even most of Durán's claims (e.g. Durán 1994:141,192), are peripheral, one-liner references as if there were simply no details to give. Because of this, cannibalism here is not interpreted as part of the study of Aztec sacrifice or as a rite bearing ontological information about Aztec culture.

2.3 — The Frequency of Sacrifice and the Importance of Skulls

Thus far, this chapter has shown that there is little support for sacrifice outside of Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco, heart sacrifice, cremation, and cannibalism, and yet plenty of evidence for the sacrifice of women and children, both comprising over a third of archaeological remains. One final anomaly is the prevalence of disembodied skulls. These are important both for their use in calculating the frequency of sacrifice, and for their ontological significance.

The Frequency of Sacrifice

Over the past five hundred years, estimates for the annual quantity of human sacrifice in the Aztec Empire have varied substantially, but few of these have even considered the archaeological data[11], and nearly all of the estimates are far higher than what the archaeological data support. While 20 000 people per year is the most commonly cited number today for Aztec human sacrifice (Dodds Pennock 2012:279), most colonial estimates are higher, including Francisco López de Gomara's 50 000 people per year and Bishop Zumarraga's claim that 20 000 children alone were sacrificed annually (Dodds Pennock 2012:279–280), though Cortés offers an exceptionally low estimate of 3000–4000 people (Cortés 1971:36). However, it is only the

[11] For example, in her recent reassessment of this debate, Dodds Pennock (2012:278) dismissed the archaeological data as "insufficient" to even consider.

estimate derived from the Florentine Codex, of about 200–600[12] people annually, that is in line with the archaeological data, based primarily on calculations derived from skulls.

Two types of deposits in particular can be used to estimate the frequency of human sacrifice. The first are skull racks, which—because the heads on them could only have been up for a few weeks based on rates of decay—tell us how many people were sacrificed in whatever region was serviced by that skull rack in the final few weeks of its use. While in the case of the skull rack from Tlatelolco, the numbers are high enough to suggest that its use was augmented by the war associated with the Spanish invasion, it is possible that the numbers are accurate, and even if they aren't, the technique for deriving frequency estimates based on skull racks might still be useful in the future. The second, and currently the most useful source of data for calculating the frequency of sacrifice in the Aztec Empire is the skull tower of Tenochtitlan, which was the destination for skulls *after* being put on the skull racks, and which was likely the depository for nearly all of the post-skull-rack skulls of the dual capital, if not the entire empire (as no other towers are known to exist, such skulls are rarely found outside of the towers, and there is little evidence for sacrifice outside of the capital anyway). When the quantity of skulls on the excavated skull tower are set against a rough timeline for that tower's use, it allows for the calculation, presented here, of 80–1800 people being sacrificed annually for the Aztec Empire. Updating the estimates of Aztec sacrifice to account for the archaeological data is important both for determining the veracity of various ethnohistoric sources, and for ensuring what, exactly, was happening before we analyze why it did, what it meant, and how it was experienced.

The Tlatelolco *Tzompantli.* A first source of data for sacrifice calculations is the Tlatelolco *tzompantli*, found with 170 skulls pierced on it (Table 1.2), which seems to have been atypically full in its final days. Though typically described as a "skull rack", the *tzompantli* would have contained heads rather than skulls in various stages of decay. We know this because the skulls still have mandibles and some upper vertebra in anatomical position (Pijoan and Mansilla 1997:236), bones which aren't connected to the rest of the skull and thus had to have

[12] Although the Florentine Codex doesn't give a clear number for annual sacrifices, when numbers *are* given it is usually only a few people per month. Dodds Pennock (2012), reviewing the entire codex, gives the liberal estimate that this would amount to 300-600 people annually, and then multiplies it to account for the rituals happening in multiple districts to reach a guess in the low thousands. However, her reasons for this augmentation, and her high starting guess of 300-600 when a number as low as 200 could be gleaned from the codex as well, is not supported. For one, Sahagún mentions various districts of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco as well as neighbouring cities (e.g. 1981:2:176) in his description of various sacrificial rituals and procession routes.

still been held in place by ligaments and muscles. This, in turn, provides us with a timeline: 170 people were killed in a short period of time, before the flesh rotted away. Based on rates of decomposition, and given the fact that August 24th, 1521 (Gregorian) is when Tenochtitlan surrendered to the Spanish-and-indigenous army assaulting it, making it likely that the last heads were deposited in summer, that period of time was likely 2–3 weeks.[13]

If 170 people were sacrificed in 2–3 weeks, or in one Aztec month of 20 days, and if those sacrifices were typical for a month's worth of sacrifices, then Tlatelolco would be sacrificing about 3000 people per year (170 skulls*18 months). Being the closest ethnically and geographically to Tenochtitlan, it is plausible that the Tlatelolcans had one of the highest rates of sacrifice. Only by believing this 3000 people per year, and multiplying it by seven skull racks of equal size (the higher end of what could be derived from the Florentine Codex: Solari 2008:160), can the 20 000/year estimate be reached based on the archaeological data.

However, this seems ethnohistorically and archaeologically unlikely; more likely is that the Tlatelolco skull rack was fuller than normal because of the war that led to the fall of the empire. This would be in line with the possible finding of European skulls (Jarquín and Martínez 2017) on the *tzompantli* in Zultépec-Tecoaque, and Sahagún's claim that in the weeks prior to August 24th, only one person (a *teixiptla* of Teteo Innan) would normally have been sacrificed in Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco, and thus the rack should have been largely empty when the city fell. That the rack *could* hold 170 people suggests that it did on at least one occasion, but that space may have been only used in exceptional circumstances like during political upheavals or temple dedications.

[13] How long it takes for flesh to decompose varies substantially based on temperature, moisture and degree of exposure. Exposed bodies decay much faster, and if conditions are the ideal combination of hot and humid, a body can skeletonize in as fast as 10-14 days (Bass 1996:181-182). Due to its high altitude, Mexico City experiences fairly cool summers, slowly decomposition, and a lot of summer rainfall, which speeds it up by cooling the body, leaching body contents, and keeping flesh moist for maggots and bacteria (Archer 2004:40). In the summer in Tennessee, Bass (1996:183-185) observes that within a few weeks a body lying outside will be near skeletonization, with bones visible through the flesh and beetles swarming the body. Compared to Memphis Tennessee, Mexico City today is about 11 degrees cooler on average in August and the tzompantli head were exposed to the sun (preserving the flesh and thus holding the bones together longer), both of which would slow decomposition (Bass 1996:182). Opposingly, decomposition would be sped up by the fact that Mexico City experiences about double the rainfall of Tennessee, and the heads on the skull rack were not touching the ground and were smaller (than bodies). Thus, the Tennessee estimates aren't likely far different from the rates of decomposition in Tenochtitlan, and the heads on the skull rack were likely only up for 2-3 weeks before they were taken down, since they would be taken down well before they were skeletonized and the mandibles and vertebra fell off.

The Skull Tower (Tenochtitlan). A second and more helpful source for calculating frequency estimates for the time being is the skull tower in Tenochtitlan. Although, as presented in Table 1, 676 skulls had been excavated as of 2017 (BBC 2017), there is less data for those more recent excavations. Instead, here I analyze the earlier finding of 445 skulls, published in 2017, which were identified as dating to approximately 1486 to 1502 CE and the (16-year) 6th stage of the Templo Mayor based on stratigraphy (Matos, Barrera and Vázquez 2017:54). This skull tower is thought to be one of two mentioned ethnohistorically that were linked by a skull rack (though all three might be referred to as the *Huei Tzompantli* or the main skull rack), and all three are thought to have been found (Matos, Barrera and Vázquez 2017:56; In ~); heads would have been placed on the skull rack initially, and then moved to the skull tower later. The following three paragraphs show calculations for the frequency of sacrifice based on these data, which result in an annual sacrifice estimate of only 80–1800 people.

To calculate an estimate based on the skull tower, three sets of numbers are needed: 1) an estimate of how many skulls were on the towers in total (the minimum being 890, or 445*2); 2) an estimate for how long the towers were used for (16 years for this subsample); and 3) an estimate for what proportion of the skulls of sacrificed people ended up in the skull towers. In regards to the latter, and if remains counted as "sacrificed" for the purposes of this calculation are skull-rack/tower skulls, isolated skulls used in secondary rituals, remains from rain-god sacrifices, and dismembered multiple burials (containing skulls) across all of the sites presented in Tables 1.1–1.3, then out of the 979[14] sacrificed remains excavated from the Aztec Empire that weren't found on a skull rack (because the skull racks were not a final destination), only 69.1% (n=676) ended up in the skull tower, and in most cases[15] the remaining 30.9% (n=303) were never pierced for a skull rack either.

On the most conservative end, then, only those 445 skulls existed on each of the two skull towers (for a total of 890), and were placed there over a 16-year period (this would dismiss the newer-found skulls, which increase the total of 445 skulls per tower to 676, as being from other

[14] This "979" includes skulls from Tenochtitlan (42 from the Tlaloc Rain-God Sacrifice; 108 from All Other Deposits in the Templo Mayor Precinct; 20 from the Metropolitan Cathedral Rain-God Sacrifice; 676 from the Skull Tower), Tlatelolco (43 from the Ehecatl Rain-God Sacrifice), and Teopanzolco (90 from the Burial). Burials 14 and 72 at Tlatelolco aren't included because of insufficient data about the number of skulls present.

[15] The exception being eighteen skulls deposited in the Templo Mayor Precinct, as well as an unknown number of skull masks found in Templo Mayor offerings. At least some of these masks were initially pierced for a *tzompantli*, as can be seen in Figure 2 in Chapter 3.

years). This conservative view would yield an annual sacrifice estimate of only 80[16] people per year, including those who didn't end up in the tower. On the liberal end, however, there could have been far more skulls on the skull rack over that same 16-year time period. If 20 000[17] skulls is used instead of 445, then an annual sacrifice estimate of 1809[18] people per year is reached.

This estimate of about 80–1800 is *20 times* lower than the oft-cited 20 000/year. Only the estimate drawn from the Florentine Codex, estimating hundreds of people annually, matches the archaeological data from the skull tower.

The Ontological Significance of Skulls.

Although many deposits have been found that include both skulls and bodies, isolated skulls comprise a full half of the human remains that have currently been recovered from the Aztec Empire (Tables 1.1–1.3), and there are no deposits with bodies that are missing skulls to balance them out. One reason for this—and perhaps another reason for the low cremation numbers found archaeologically—may be that human remains that were not used for ritual purposes were deposited farther away from the ritual centres of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco, or from temples more generally, in places that haven't yet been excavated. This disproportionate finding of skulls to bodies is partly explained by the separation of skulls for the *tzompantli* racks: 878 skulls have been found either on a skull rack or punctured for a skull rack and then placed in another offering (in Templo Mayor offerings and at the Metropolitan Cathedral; López and López 2008:3; Solari 2008:146). However, we also have 47 unmodified isolated skulls and 33 skulls masks from Templo Mayor offerings (López and López 2008:140). In total, this is 958 isolated skulls, or a full 50.1% of the remains presented in Tables 1.1–1.3. Only two other cases show a similar isolation of a body part: the deposit of children's neck vertebra at the ball court in Tenochtitlan (INAH 2017), and one offering at the Templo Mayor where a single human mandible was found (Matos 1987:40–47). According to the Florentine Codex and other

[16] [(445 skulls*2 skull towers)/16 years]*(100/69.1)

[17] If the skull tower was indeed started around 1486, which was also when the Templo Mayor was dedicated (Dodds Pennock 2012:284), then it would likely have been in use for 34 years until the Spanish invasion. It could have, however, been started with the founding of the Triple Alliance Empire in 1430 or even earlier, as the Mexica had settled the island in 1325 (Moctezuma 1987:28). Ortiz de Montellano (1983) calculated that, over their entire lifespan, the skull rack and tower of Tenochtitlan could have held no more than 60 000 skulls based on space and structural considerations and likely held far fewer. This is why 20 000 is used here as an upper limit for the 16-year period.

[18] (20000/16)*(100/69.1)

cannibalism-advocating sources, certain body parts were eaten, but even in those accounts the destination of the other body parts is never mentioned (Acuña 1987:35; Sahagún 1981:2:54); based on the ethnohistoric data, there is no reason to expect a disproportionate lack of bodies to be found archaeologically. Some sources, like the *Anales de Tlatelolco* (in Isaac 2005:6), do, however, describe rituals where different body parts (e.g. head, heart, body) were buried in different places, which could fit the archaeological data.

The focus on skulls is likely due to aspects of Aztec ontology relating to what I call the "life-complex", a concept established in Chapter 3, which was composed of the embodied *tonalli*, the embodied *ihiyotl*, and the disembodied self or *teyolia*. The *tonalli*, a sort of life-supporting heat, was carried in the blood and focussed in the head (Furst 1995:126; López Austin 1988:221). While the *tonalli* ceased to relate to the self following death, it did linger in human hair following death (López Austin 1988:221) and the importance of skulls suggests that it also lingered in the skull. The *tonalli* in hair made hair a powerful object, even when shorn from the rest of the body and even if the person it came from was dead (López Austin 1988:221). The same may have held true for the *tonalli* in skulls, meaning displaying skulls on a *tzompantli* was also displaying a certain power, whether to protect and strengthen the temples and priests nearby, or as a declaration of power. The *tonalli* in skulls also adds power to the offerings of individual skulls found in the Templo Mayor Precinct; however, the *tonalli* made the blood, hair and head of *anyone* powerful, and may not have related specially to sacrifice. Solari (2008:161) notes that the isolated skulls that have been found in offerings in the Templo Mayor Precinct are all associated with buildings and could all have been secondary deposits from building consecration and expansion rituals, rather than from calendrical rites or sacrifices.

The significance of skulls is given nuance by the many carvings of skulls that are also found in the Templo Mayor precinct, including a "tzompantli" of 240 carved stone skulls (Matos 1987:34) and two similarly carved altars found nearby by Batres in 1900 (Batres 1902:39). Given the apparent abundance of skulls, and the existence of a tower made of real skulls nearby (the *Huei Tzompantli*), the choice to use stone skulls suggests that there might be strict rules about when real skulls could be used, even amongst important politico-religious structures. The use of both real and "fake" or constructed skulls is curious because constructed entities seem just as "real" to the Aztecs in other rituals as the non-constructed ones, as in the case of both inanimate and animate beings who were turned into animate embodiments of gods (Chapter 4).

The difference may have been that constructed skulls did not have a *tonalli,* but then their importance is unclear.

Why the rest of the body beyond these heads seems to have been deposited elsewhere may have related to another aspect of the life-complex: the *ihiyotl*. Giving power to the body in a similar way to the *tonalli*, the *ihiyotl* is said to cause an emission of harmful vapours from the corpse and to make a corpse both powerful and dangerous (López Austin 1988: 235–236). Thus, bodies may have been deposited elsewhere to avoid them causing harm.

Building off of these reflections, the Aztec understanding of self will now be analyzed in order to better understand death, humans and sacrifice within Aztec ontology. This will be followed by an analysis of *teteo* or gods, and how humans and gods could meet in the phenomenon of *teixiptlahuan.* The sacrifice of *teixiptlahuan* or human-gods more generally will be followed by a specific analysis of the sacrifice of children—who were also *teixiptlahuan*—to the rain gods, in order to shed light on how Aztec ontology informed their experience of sacrifice.

CHAPTER 3 — The Aztec Self

Human sacrifice takes a large part of its meaning from how the self and life are conceived of ontologically. Sacrifice, as a form of ritual killing, has a relationship with the understanding of death, just as what death is is related to life, and life in turn is related to the self that lives. In addition, understanding the human self is important to understanding sacrifice because *teixiptlahuan*, who were sacrificed during most months of the Aztec calendar, were both human and god. "Human" sacrifice, as used thus far, has been an oversimplification: in most calendrical sacrifices, the being that was sacrificed was not actually human according to Aztec ontology. Only through an understanding of the human self can a godly self be contrasted, and only through an understanding of the components of the Aztec "life-complex" (of which the self was only a part), can the interdependence and vulnerability of life, and the actual process involved in death, be understood.

This chapter will explore the Aztec understanding of the human self. Two major books have been previously published on this topic: López Austin (1988) argues for a three-part Aztec "soul" and analyzes the self in contexts like death and Nahualism, while Furst (1995) takes a

cultural materialist approach and argues Aztec beliefs about the "soul" and the body all come from (scientific) observation. Both agree with the prominently held views about the Aztec self, that a) it was tripartite (comprised of the *tonalli*, *teyolia* and *ihiyotl*) and b) it was embodied. However, the Aztec self (*teyolia)* appears to have been singular and not embodied, making the human self, in a reversal of the common conception, less physical than the godly self.

Two entities, as mentioned in the previous chapter, accompanied the self during life and comprised a sort of "life-complex". That skulls are found displayed on racks and in disproportionate quantities to bodies archaeologically is likely related to the *tonalli* heat and life-force that is focussed in the head. Why bodies were disposed of further away, or necks mattered in the child sacrifice in the ball court, may have been related to the *ihiyotl*, which was the breath or wind that flowed through a body. The *tonalli* and the *ihiyotl*, unlike the self, were embodied, and were crucial to keeping a person alive. The self or *teyolia* was dependent on these other two entities in order to live, just as humans were dependant on the gods to live, and the vulnerability of a human to death should one of these entities be lost or damaged mirrors the vulnerability of the very existence of the Aztec world.

3.1 — A Note on Terminology: "Personhood", "Soul", and "Embodiment"

Terminology is very important when studying different ontologies, because a term that comes from one ontological tradition—and is broadly Western, say, or Christian—will bring with it the assumptions and judgments of that ontology. "Embodiment of the self" makes no sense if neither the body nor the self have been defined, and for clarity, the concepts of "person", "self", "individual", "soul", "body", and "embodiment" are briefly explained here.

"Personhood" includes the social, collective and relational aspects of identity[19]. Personhood affects and is affected by status and legal rights, the relationships between people[20], and the relationships between people and other—including supernatural, dead, or inanimate—beings (Gillespie 2001: 75–82). What is recognized as a "person" in one culture might be wholly unrelated to the concept of "human"—in some cases, children or human slaves may not be recognized as persons (Gillespie 2001:82), and in some cases animals or other non-humans are

[19] "Identity" is being used here to refer to the complex of how one self is labelled, categorized and perceived ("who you are"), both though self-labelling and being labelled by others.
[20] "people" is being used casually in this discussion to mean self, person or human.

recognized as persons. This concept of the social "person" ("*personnage*") was initially developed by Mauss (Gillespie 2001:76)

"Self", by contrast, is a word that may or may not require a social context. The self is the locus or capacity for self-awareness and consciousness (Wolputte 2004:261), and is the most fundamental marker of identity and self-conceptualization. Processes or elements of the self include memory and (sense-making) narrative (Wolputte 2004:260). Depending on one's culture and ontology, a self might include multiple entities independently able to survive and each with their own personalities, or multiple dependent entities or components bound together, or a single entity or soul. For example, the Huron and modern Hindus both saw the self as comprised of two parts—in the former, one is attached to the body and the other isn't, and in the latter, one is always changing and the other isn't (Robb 2008; Fowler 2004:19). The Maya and Egyptians both saw the self as composed of even more parts: Egyptians as having two that survive into death but at least two more in life (Meskell and Joyce 2003:22), while the Maya—in some similarity to the Nahua—are argued to have seen intangible things like scent, breath, one's name, and one's voice, as well as the physical body, as part of the self, in addition to seeing the body as a potential locus for more than one person (Meskell and Joyce 2003:25–26).

The "individual", is the Western concept of self, and would not include any of the examples just given. This understanding of self includes it being an independent, self-contained and mutually exclusive entity (Gillespie 2001:83) that is unchanging, autonomous, and singular (Wolputte 2004:261). "Individual" was originally a Christian concept that expressed the opposite of what it does now: that one was indivisible from the Christian God (Fowler 2004:12–13).

This makes "individual" the more secular sibling of the "soul". In addition to the characteristics of an "individual", using "soul" also assumes that the self is disembodied and lives on after death, and thus necessitates some form of theism. By the 1400s, the Christian "soul" had come to represent a self that was separate from the world, internally unified and indivisible (individual), immortal and intangible, and only inhabiting and animating the container of the body (Fowler 2004:13). When used outside of its autochthonous Abrahamic and Christian context, "soul" still designates "the insubstantial part of a human being", a part which survives death, is singular, and only inhabits the body (Furst 1995:3,21).

Because a "soul" is immaterial and only a resident of the body, the word "soul" does not allow for the possibility of embodiment. The "body" can be defined as the physical aspect or

locus of the self, whether it is the container for the self or the self itself; "embodiment" refers to the latter, when the self itself is physical, and when there is a lack of differentiation between the body and the self and thus a lack of interaction between them. As Csordas (1990) writes, "embodiment" involves a "collapsing of dualities" and "requires that the body…is nondualistic, that is, not distinct from or in interaction with an opposed principle of mind" (Csordas 1990:8), which not only undermines the Western dichotomy of mind or soul versus body, but also a Western tendency to see the mind as superior to the body (Wolputte 2004:253). Although with an embodied view of self, "self" should include and be the same as "body", some scholars still find the word "body" useful when encountering embodiment (Wolputte 2004:253). While embodiment may also be used to describe certain actions, processes or moments (e.g. glossolalia in Csordas 1990:31), a truly embodied view of *self* would mean that harm to the body would harm the self, and changes to the body would change the self, as well as vice versa.

Although the Aztec self has been said to have three parts (the *tonalli* as heat and day-sign, the *teyolia* as self, and the *ihiyotl* as breath) and to be embodied, and despite that neither of these qualities fits the meaning of the word "soul", "soul" is the word that has most frequently been used in writings on the Aztec self. Typically, the Aztecs are either described as having a three-part soul or three souls (e.g. Carrasco 1999:180; Dodds Pennock 2008:172), a decision which can cloud Aztec ontology. Even if, as presented here, the *teyolia* was the complete and singular Aztec self, which was not embodied and survived death, the use of the word "soul" is still a problematic for its Christian history, connotations, and other denotive meanings: that the soul animates the body it inhabits (Furst 1995:4), which in the Aztec case is a role filled by the *tonalli* and *ihiyotl* and not the *teyolia*; and for the understanding that "soul" = "self" and thus cannot include the impersonal and embodied entities of the complimentary *tonalli* and *ihiyotl*. In fact, the Aztec case presents an interesting terminological dilemma: there is no word in English for entities like the *tonalli* and *ihiyotl*, entities which work with and support the self but are not *of* it, which is why the term "life-complex" is suggested here for describing how these two entities worked with the self during life.

3.2 — The *Tonalli*

The word *tonalli* has referred to two things, both of which are ultimately shared and impersonal. On one hand, the *tonalli* was one's day-sign, which brought with it a suggestion of a

future and a personality in a similar way to a horoscope. On the other, it was one's bodily life force, given by the sun, expressed as heat, and located primarily in the crown of the head as well as circulating through the blood. This second aspect of *tonalli* was shared by some animals, and, as it was given by the sun/sun-god, also represented a connection between the gods and the natural world. It was divisible and embodied, and, because it was both depended on for life and easily lost, it made life itself fragile. Because it was carried, in part, by the blood, it is important for the practice of auto-sacrifice, where the *tonalli* itself was being spilled and shown, representing an ultimate unity and sameness between people.

The root of "tonalli" is "tona", which means to be warm or for the sun to shine (Bassett 2015:116). *Tetonal*, though literally "someone's tonalli" was translated in Molina's Spanish-Nahuatl dictionary from the mid to late 1500s as a "portion of each person", and *totonal*, literally "our tonalli", was translated by Molina as "the sign under which one is born" or soul or spirit (Furst 1995:64; Molina 1585:111,151). The word *tonal(li)* never actually appears on its own, but only with modifiers (Furst 1995:63), and these two variants reflect the two meanings of the word. However, in most cases, *tonalli* only refers to one's day-sign (Bassett 2015:116), and all that that entailed.

<u>*Tonalli* as Day-Sign</u>

One's day-sign, a combination of a day number (between 1 and 13) and sign (out of 20 possibilities), was established on the first day ze was exposed to the sun (López Austin 1988:211). The Aztecs did not believe in "fate" (a deterministic word meaning that one cannot control the course of zer life because it is in the hands of divinity), but in a sort of suggested or probably course for one's life and personality, that ze could fall short of (López Austin 1988: 214), or improve upon (Bassett 2015:116) depending on zer actions.

This day-sign had a large practical impact on people's lives, including being a factor in how sacrificees were chosen (Sahagún 1981:1:68). Bassett (2015) describes the *tonalli* in this sense as "prerogative", because with every day-sign came certain privileges, like being able to walk on certain roads or wear certain clothing (118). In this way, one's *tonalli* could be manifest in material items. When Moctezuma II sent Cortés some of his personal capes as a gift, he "presented his *tonalli* to Cortés" (Bassett 2015:118–119), which was both manifested in the gifts, and represented in the display of the privileges derived from his *tonalli* day-sign. Because of the

importance of one's day-sign, parents might delay exposing their child to the sun for days in order to obtain for them a more favourable sign (Furst 1995:80).

A *tonalli* was impersonal and not specific to anyone, as more generally everyone had one, and more specifically anyone born on the same day had the same *tonalli* (López Austin 1988:228). On a large scale, the *tonalli* connected everyone to each other. As all things related to the ability to live, the *tonalli* provided a connection between life and the gods, who were both the source of the *tonalli* as heat energy, and possessed their own *tonalli* day signs (e.g. Huitzilopochtli was 1 Flint, Chalchiuhtlicue was 1 Water). These days signs, just as they did for humans, gave the deities certain powers and responsibilities, and helped set them apart from one another (Bassett 2015:121).

Tonalli as Heat and Life-Force

Just as the *tonalli* as day-sign was something shared by humans and gods, the *tonalli* as heat and life-force was shared between humans and some animals (Carrasco 2014:88), rendering the *tonalli*, in both cases, as something which was more related to a social personhood than selfhood, connecting a greater cosmic community of the sun (god), humans and other life together. This *tonalli* was directly connected to the *tonalli* of one's nuclear family, and the *tonalli* of one member preserved in shorn hair after death could protect and strengthen a family for years (Carrasco and Sessions 2011:128; López Austin 1988:322).

That animals also possessed this kind of *tonalli* is something supported by the faunal remains found at the Templo Mayor. Faunal remains weren't discussed in Chapter 2, but just as a disproportionate number of human heads to bodies have been found archaeologically, so too is there a disproportionate emphasis on the heads—and also skins—of certain symbolic animal species (e.g. snakes, alligators) found in Templo Mayor offerings in contexts with very good preservation (López Luján 2005:102, 240, 368). This would suggest that just as the *tonalli* was physically embodied in the skull of humans, it was also possessed by certain animals, making their skulls particularly meaningful or powerful as offerings.

This second understanding of *tonalli—tonalli* as divine heat and life force—was where energy, warmth, appetite, wakefulness, and the ability for children to grow came from (López Austin 1988:206; Román 2008:56). Furst (1995) describes this *tonalli* as "a life force felt and transmitted as heat" (135), and in Carrasco and López Austin's "energy"-centered understanding

of the Aztec self and gods, *tonalli* is described as both a locus of or receptacle for sun (*tona*) energy and as the energy itself (Carrasco 2014:88). This (meaning of) *tonalli* was received from the gods shortly before birth (and thus days before the *tonalli* day-sign), at what Furst (1995) identifies as the moment when a baby "drops" hours before birth (66), and was supported by the exposure of the baby to fire until the baby was exposed to the sun and its *tonalli* was fully established (López Austin 1988:211).

The *tonalli* as heat was both necessary for life, and made life vulnerable through the ease with which it might be weakened or lost. While the *tonalli* might be strengthened by age (especially "old age", achieved at 52) (López Austin 1988:258) and pleasant aromas (López Austin 1988:394), it could be weakened by being a *tlacotli* or indebted servant (López Austin 1988:402–404), or having too much sex (López Austin 1988:312) (despite that sex was normally viewed very positively by the Aztecs [Clendinnen 1991:167; López Austin 1988:253]). It could also be lost completely, most commonly because of fright, and if not retrieved, one would die in a matter of days (López Austin 1988:224). Children were particularly susceptible to losing their *tonalli* because their skulls hadn't completely ossified yet, and children often wore necklaces that could harbour a lost *tonalli* until it returned (López Austin: 206, 219), necklaces which might fit those found with the children of the Tlaloc sacrifice in the Templo Mayor (López Luján 2005:149). When a *tonalli* was lost, a person might behave with lost or impaired consciousness until ze either died or regained zer *tonalli* (Furst 1995:112).

The *tonalli* as life heat, like the *tonalli* as day sign, could manifest in materials, which might act as a safeguard, in the case of the children's necklaces, or as a source of danger or added vulnerability. *Tonalli* manifested in blood, fingernails and hair (Furst 1995:126), even after these things were separated from the rest of the body, and cutting hair short or off entirely made one more vulnerable to the loss or theft of zer *tonalli,* which is why priests never washed or cut their hair (López Austin 1988:221). The *tonalli* in shorn hair could be used by a sorcerer to hurt the person it came from, or could give strength to a warrior or a sick person (López Austin 1988:221).

That the *tonalli* could be preserved in shorn hair while a person was still alive, and was present in blood and hair regardless of where the rest of the *tonalli* was—whether "lost" or not—shows a final property of it: that it was divisible. While the main *tonalli* was active and could move or be lost, there was also passive *tonalli* which lingered in body parts where the *tonalli* was

strongest, like the hair and the head. This passive, embodied *tonalli* might even be seen as a mere "residue" of the *tonalli* proper rather than a divided half.

The existence of passive *tonalli* and the ability for either type of *tonalli* to be physically manifested in materials has direct implications for sacrifice. Before being sacrificed, a captive warrior had his hair shorn and was stripped of his military garb and accoutrements (which were material representations of his day-sign, character and fortune), and in this way Furst (1995:137) argues that a captive had already lost much of (both aspects of) his *tonalli* before he was sacrificed and his *tonalli*-laden blood spilled. While removing the physical manifestations and privileges of one's day-sign might be a display of a greater power (that of the state, the gods, the priests) subsuming a smaller one (the sacrificee's) or a greater purpose taking over, the loss of the *tonalli* as heat through the shearing of hair and the loss of blood mean that collecting *tonalli* was not a priority of the ritual. If having *tonalli* to display through the heads on the skull rack, or simply having powerful *tonalli*-infused entities like skulls and hair in the possession of the priests or the state, was a top priority, then sacrifices would probably be performed without a loss of blood or the shearing of hair. Rather, it seems that the priority was given to the gods: blood, infused with the *tonalli* heat that came from the sun, was offered back to that sun, and the temples were left with what remnants of passive *tonalli* yet lingered in the drained and shaved skulls, as a declaration of their relationship with the gods.

The two senses of *tonalli*, though seemingly different, could reflect the same thing. Though *tonalli* is often spoken of *as* a day-sign, it is possible that instead it *had* a day-sign. In this way, the *tonalli* which comes from the sun and gives life to the body *gives* a day sign (the day when someone first receives it directly from the sun), and thus the two are one. Unlike a "soul", the *tonalli* is thus neither immortal, indivisible, nor personal, and does not represent even a third of a self. Rather, it is telling that when the *tonalli* is lost all that happens is death—one does not lose zer self, one of zer selves, or a part of who ze is[21], beyond a lack of bodily functioning before death. Though the *tonalli* is linked to the *teyolia* and to the self, as seen in

[21] There is one hypothesized exception to this. Sahagún says that the head and the *tonalli* were associated with thought and reason. This, however, is very likely a European influence. López Austin (1988:171) supports Sahagún by arguing that it is "logical" to associate the head, where the senses are predominantly located, with thought and reason. However, the very association between "reason" and the senses is an idea of the Western Enlightenment, and as Furst (1995:5) notes, the heavily influential Greek notion of *psyche* placed thought and reason in the head.

how *tonalli* in shorn hair can be used to harm someone, the *tonalli*—though a linking force to the gods and other living things as well as one's prophesized lot in life—is by and large a force that *animates* the body, but is not *part* of the self.

Tonalli in Autosacrifice

If sacrifice is always a rite that involves killing or death (Tatlock 2006 in Klaus and Toyne 2016:2), then autosacrifice, or ritual bloodletting, was not actually sacrifice. However, autosacrifice was practiced far more frequently by the Aztecs than human sacrifice, and it paralleled sacrifice in a number of ways. The meaning of autosacrifice, as a practice where blood was offered, is intimately related to the *tonalli* found in blood. While on one hand the *tonalli* as day-sign related to inequality and certain privileges, it was also shared by everyone and spilled by everyone through autosacrifice, in an act that united people (as an effect, not a purpose) in a similar way to human sacrifice. It was also, because the gods lacked blood, an important act that divided humans from gods, and yet strengthened their relationship with each other.

Practically, the Aztecs practiced autosacrifice by puncturing a hole in their flesh and sometimes also passing knotted cord or straw through the opening. The hole was usually made using a maguey thorn (Klein 1983:296), although they also used obsidian and bone (López Luján 2005:173; Sahagún in Klein 1983:296) and the Maya elite were known for using stingray spines (Klein 1983:294). While designed to spill blood, the most common places chosen (ear, tongue, calf, foreskin), were places that wouldn't bleed very much or cause as much pain as others (Furst 1995:135). Autosacrifice is frequently depicted in pictographic codices (e.g. Figure 1) and described in the *Relaciones* (e.g. Acuña 1987:115,144), and bloodletters are commonly found in Templo Mayor offerings (López Luján 2005:173).

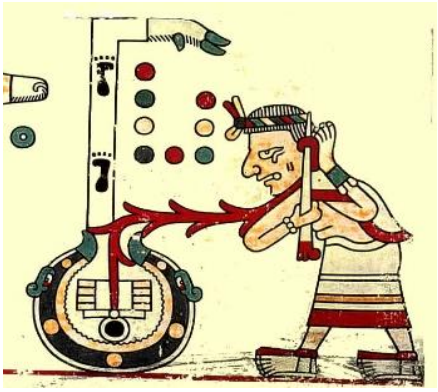

Figure 1. Autosacrifice with a maguey thorn through the ear. (*Codex Laud:45*)

Autosacrifice could have caused substantial damage to a person. Priests (who were predominantly of noble families) did more autosacrifice than any other group, and are said to have occasionally died from the practice (Klein 1983:355). Autosacrifice involving the tongue would have impaired speech and even temporarily silenced someone (Carrasco 1999:186; Meskell and Joyce 2003:157), and autosacrifice involving the genitalia may have had sexual or fertility-related consequences (Durán in Klein 1983:295). Autosacrifice could be performed in either gratitude or supplication to the gods for their gifts, including of life and health (Klein 1983:294), which could add significance to these disabling aspects of autosacrifice. That someone practicing autosacrifice might be taking away, at least temporarily, zer own abilities (like the ability to speak, which was particularly significant to the Aztec), could add the following layers of meaning to the act: a) that a human was weakening zerself in order to strengthen a god, b) that ze was paying a price for zer transgressions and making them visible, or c) that ze was putting zerself in the hands of that god and acknowledging the god's superiority by demonstrating weakness.

Because, unlike human sacrifice, autosacrifice was entirely about spilling blood rather than killing, and because blood contained *tonalli* which was related to privilege, autosacrifice had a complicated relationship with class. While spilling blood could be seen as losing *tonalli* (Furst 1995:130), it was also *revealing* one's *tonalli*, because of the privileges that came with certain *tonalli* day-signs. What links the spilling of blood to the privilege of nobility, rather than just the privileges of certain day-signs, are the importance of autosacrifice to the succession ceremony of a *tlatoani* and the origin story of autosacrifice. The most commonly depicted type of autosacrifice (or even sacrifice) by far in the Templo Mayor Precinct is the autosacrifice

performed by a *tlatoani* during his succession ceremony (Klein 1983:293,350). By shedding his blood before becoming *tlatoani*, the ruler-to-be showed his capability, bravery and strength through the exposition of his blood (Klein 1983:350,360), qualities which would have, in part, been informed by his *tonalli* day-sign, thus adding one kind of privilege to another. A more direct link between nobility and autosacrifice is found in the mythohistory of the first autosacrifice. The first autosacrifice was performed by Quetzalcoatl just as the first sacrifice was also performed by a god; however, Quetzalcoatl's autosacrifice was done solely for the *pipiltin* or nobles, in order to create the *macehualtin* (commoners) that would serve the *pipiltin*, which leads Klein (1983) to argue that autosacrifice would have been fundamentally different for nobles versus commoners, and would have upheld a system of inequality (350–353).

However, while blood and the spilling of blood might have been seen to represent a fundamental difference between *pipiltin* and *macehualtin*, because everyone shared in the same practice, this inequality was simultaneously defied. Commoner *macehualtin* thanked and requested the gifts of the gods just as the nobility did, making autosacrifice one of the few regular practices shared by both commoners and nobles. This suggests that when it came to the gods, humans were more similar—and similarly weak—than they were different.

3.3 — The *Teyolia*

The *teyolia*, *toyolia*, or *yolia* (López Austin 1988:229) can all refer to an entity roughly located in the heart—the *toyollo* in Nahuatl [Molina 1985:149]—which included all of the components of the self. It was the only entity of the life-complex which was personal and unique, although it was still an entity possessed by non-humans. The *teyolia*, unlike the *tonalli*, was neither embodied nor divisible, and it alone survived death.

The *teyolia* was the complete self. Molina (1985:9,149) translated *teyolia* and *toyolia* as soul (*anima, alma*) in his *Vocabulario*, and the root word of *teyolia* and *yolia* is "yoli-", which appears in many combinations that describe one's personality, including attributes, feelings and social qualities, like the words for creative or generous (Furst 1995:19; López Austin 1988:174,230). The *teyolia* was the locus of one's character and the origin of one's talents and capabilities (Furst 1995:22). It represented consciousness generally (Dodds Pennock 2008:172), was the centre of equilibrium for the self (Carrasco 1999:180), and was associated with thought and feeling, knowledge and memory, love and will/inclination (López Austin 1988:190). López

Austin (1988:194) calls it the most important part of the (Nahua) self, and Furst (1995) describes it as "the locus of human identity, talent and endeavor" (20). Thus, it included all elements typically associated with selfhood.

Like the *tonalli*, the *teyolia* was received from the gods in the womb (Carrasco 1999:180), but unlike (part of) the *tonalli*, it always remained with the body until death (López Austin 1988:236). It could, however, be strengthened or weakened like the *tonalli*, including by a person's thoughts and actions (a vicious cycle, given that these would have, to a degree, originated from the *teyolia* or an imbalance therein), like acting immorally or committing a crime, by illnesses, by sorcerers, and by reaching old age (like the *tonalli*) (López Austin 1988:232, 258), or by being accomplished in war, a trade or an art, or being a family member of someone who was (Carrasco 1999:180–181). Differences were recognized between *teyolia*, with some *teyolia* being described with adjectives like "sweet", "raw", "cold", "hard", and "bitter", each with their own strengths and weaknesses (for example, a bitter heart offered protection against sorcerers) (López Austin 1988:231); certain people, including priests, artists and people gifted at divination, were seen as having a "deified" heart or a heart with divine fire in it (Carrasco 2014:89; López Austin 1988:231–232).

A *teyolia*, or something similar, was also possessed by various non-human entities, though not, notably, deities like Huitzilopochtli. "*Teyolia*" could refer to the heart or self of towns, mountains, lakes, temples (including the Templo Mayor), oceans, and some animals (Carrasco 1999:180; Carrasco 2014:89; López Austin 1988:232). In both Nahua and Maya ontology, burying someone under a new building could give it a heart, while just burying heads could release positive energy and protect the building (López Luján 2005:205). This could explain the various deposits of human skulls found in the Templo Mayor precinct (that aren't part of a *tzompantli*), all of which are associated with buildings and so may have been from similar consecration rituals (Solari 2008:161). This could also explain the skulls of certain animals put into offerings in the Templo Mayor: perhaps these skulls, like those of humans, helped to protect the building. However, the idea that burying a head, which is predominantly associated with the *tonalli* and perhaps to some degree also the *ihiyotl* but in no way is related to the *teyolia*, could give a new building a heart could a) suggests a link between the *teyolia* of a building and a *tonalli* in a similar way to the link between these two in a human's life-complex, and b) demonstrates that the *teyolia* was not really linked to the heart or any particular body part

the way the *tonalli* was, or a heart would have been deposited instead. Then again, whether the "heart" of buildings was seen to be the same thing as the *teyolia* of humans is unknown.

The human *teyolia* was the only entity of the life-complex that survived death for long, because it was the only one that existed independently of the body. Death within Aztec ontology meant the disbanding of the life-complex comprised of the *tonalli*, the *teyolia*, and the *ihiyotl*, the disintegration of the *tonalli* and *ihiyotl*, and the moving-on of the *teyolia* to the afterlife. The *teyolia* went to one of four planes at death: Chichihualcuauhco, for still-nursing Stage 1 children (under age 4); Tlalocan, for those who died of the rain gods' water-related deaths or were sacrificed to them; Tonatiuh Ilhuicatl or the realm of the sun, for those who died of war and other sacrifice-related deaths; and Mictlan, where everyone else went. The *teyolia* went to one of these realms shortly after death, alone and unaccompanied by the *tonalli* or *ihiyotl*, showing that those other two entities did not cause any alteration (beyond immateriality) or lack in the self when they were removed. Even gender or sex were not lost and thus appear to have been located in the *teyolia* rather than being purely a bodily or social phenomenon: the fates of those who went to Tonatiuh Ilhuicatl depended on their sex or gender, with men helping the sun rise for four years before becoming pollinators and nectar drinkers, and women helping it to set before becoming powerful Tzitzimime and Cihuateteo goddesses.

For those going to Tonatiuh Ilhuicac or Mictlan, the body was said to cremated and the *teyolia* released with the burning of the body rather than death (Carrasco and Sessions 2011:127), though as mentioned there is little archaeological support for this idea, suggesting the *teyolia* did not need this help to depart. On its journey, the *teyolia* of the dead could still be reached through fire and stone. Travelling to the plane of the sun or to Mictlan took some time, and while still on its journey, the *teyolia* could be given gifts through fires (Dodds Pennock 2008:174–176). A connection was maintained even longer through a greenstone placed in the mouth of the dead person before ze was burned. This greenstone or green stone (wealth depending) was said to capture part of the *teyolia* (López Austin 1988:326); however, while this, or the prospect of the *teyolia* existing in two places at once, is possible, it seems more likely that the stone provided a link to the *teyolia* on its travels. In this way, the *teyolia* was linked to the earthly plane through the greenstone in a similar way to how fire opened a link to the *teyolia* to allow the giving of gifts.

The relationship between the *teyolia* and stones placed in mouths of the deceased have implications for the 1000+ flint knives that had been found in Templo Mayor offerings as of 2008 (López and López 2008:140). These knives have been found in three contexts: loose and unembellished; in skull masks; and in an animate form called *tecpame*, with faces on them made out of shell and obsidian (Figure 2) (Broda 1987:116; López Luján 2005:200). In his commentary for the Codex Borgia, Karl Nowotny suggests that *tecpame* might have served the function of holding the *teyolia* of a sacrificee (in Broda 1987:116), an idea which does not allow for the probability that that *tecpame* were animate in their own right (Section 4.1). However, it is possible that a similar idea holds true: that ordinary knives, rather than the *tecpame*, functioned for a sacrificee in a manner similar to how a greenstone did for cremated people. If each knife represented one person, it could explain the sheer number of ordinary knives found in offerings, a number that would otherwise seem unlikely to have been necessary for killing the number of sacrificees we find archaeologically, though it is true that flint knives were also highly symbolic to the Mexica in their own right (López Luján 2005:85 and Nagao 1985 in ~). That at least the flint knives found in the mouths of skull masks (Figure 2) were there to connect to the *teyolia* like a greenstone is suggested by the fact that only greenstones and flint knives have been found in the mouths of skulls. The finding of two jaguar skulls at the Templo Mayor, including one with a jade stone in its mouth and one with a flint knife in its mouth (different offerings) (Broda 1987:94) further this parallel, and also suggest that jaguars may have possessed *teyolia* and been seen as persons or like humans, as no other animals have been found treated in this way.

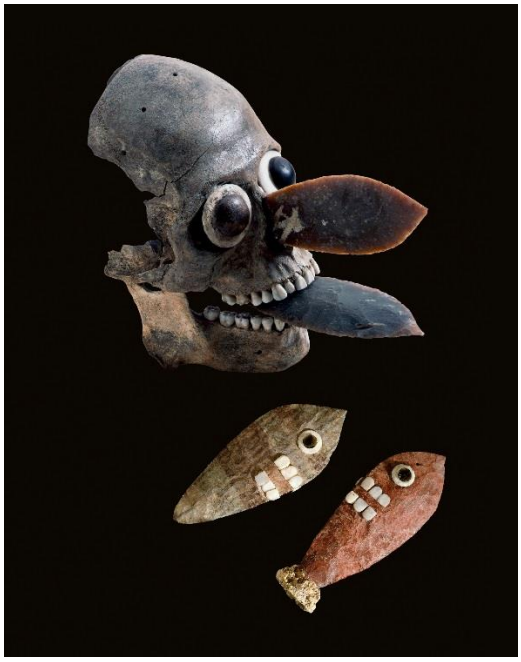

Figure 2. On top: a skull mask perforated for a *tzompantli* with flint knives in the mouth and nose. Below: *Tecpame*. (*Photo from INAH, permission from Caroline Bergeron at Pointe-à-Callière Museum.*)

Despite its relationship to the body, the *tonalli* and the *ihiyotl* during life and the ability for it to be reached through stone and fire, that the *teyolia* could journey alone to an aphysical afterworld shows that it was not embodied. As mentioned in Chapter 2, this would complicate an understanding of heart sacrifice were it archaeologically supported, as cutting out the heart would probably have harmed the person if zer self was embodied, and because the heart would have been no more meaningful an offering than blood or a head. Without an embodied self, autosacrifice would not have damaged the self beyond the physical maiming, and thus not cause permanent damage that was carried on into the afterworld. No permanent damage, in fact, would be caused to a disembodied self, meaning that although the afterworlds were not places of exceptional happiness or peace, they were places in which physical health no longer mattered, and to which illness and disability, and other problems of materiality, were not carried. Sacrifice, then, was a demonstration of the lack of materiality of the self, and its capacity to survive any sort of bodily damage.

3.4 — The *Ihiyotl*

The *ihiyotl* was the complement to the *tonalli*—the cool to its hot, the female to its male, the earth to its sun—and it was just as necessary for, and as much a part of, life as the *tonalli*. While variants of the words "tonalli*"* and "teyolia*"* were given as translations for "soul" (*anima, alma*) in Spanish, *ihiyotl* was instead given as a translation for "spirit" (*espiritu*), along with the words for wind and breath (Furst 1995:138). *Ihiyotl* itself has been translated as (or strongly associated with) "breath" (Furst 1995:138; López Austin 1988:235; Sahagún in López Austin 1988:233), including physical breath and any expelled bodily air, the power that human breath had to harm or heal (López Austin 1988:235), and breath as speech (Furst 1995:155). Words containing *ihi-* relate to breath and animating or sustaining forces; for example, the words for "to invigorate another", "to lack breath from working a lot or illness", and "to stop the breath of another" contain this prefix (Furst 1995:154–155).

In many ways the *ihiyotl* was similar or complementary to the *tonalli*. Like the *tonalli* (and the *teyolia*) the *ihiyotl* could be damaged, and like the *tonalli* it was far more related to life and living than the self. Sahagún calls the *ihiyotl* the "breath" given by Citlalinicue and Citlalatonac[22] (in López Austin 1988:233), which means that like the *tonalli* (which was from the sun), the *ihiyotl* was a life-supporting force given by the gods of one of the planes of the upperworld. In Nahua dualism, the sun, men, heat, and dryness are all related, while the earth, wetness, darkness and women are all associated (López Austin 1988:272). The *tonalli*, then, could be the male in this marriage of life- and self-supporting forces, connected to the sun and heat, while the *ihiyotl* is the female force, originating from the ultimate *Tzitzimitl* Citlalinicue (Klein 2000:16), expressed in wind—the wind that is also associated with rain—and lingering in the corpse after death, connected to the earth[23].

The *ihiyotl* has, at times, been associated with the liver. López Austin (1988:234–236) modifies this, arguing that the *ihiyotl* and the liver are two conflated but related entities, and that the *ihiyotl* only strengthens the liver. However, the liver seems far more related to the *teyolia* than the *ihiyotl*. The liver was seen as the source of passionate and aggressive feelings like anger,

[22] Citlalinicue was the god of the Milky way (and the first Tzitzimitl), and she and her partner Citlalatonac were the progenitors of all of the celestial bodies/deities, including the stars, sun, planets, and Tezcatlipoca (Klein 2000:16-17).

[23] López Austin (1988:348) makes a related observation when he notes that in pre-Hispanic Nahua thought, the *tonalli* was associated with the sky and the liver (which is sometimes associated with the *ihiyotl* but may have related to the *teyolia* instead*)* with the earth and lower world.

hate and bravery (Carrasco and Sessions 2011:126; López Austin 1988:192), and was damaged by immoral actions (e.g. adultery) but brought happiness when it was healthy (Carrasco 1999:183; López Austin 1988:235). At the very least these qualities would mean it overlaps with the domain of the *teyolia* (which, for example, was damaged by some of the same actions [like adultery] and was the loci for thought and emotion), but these qualities associated with the liver also have no connection to the concept of *ihiyotl* as breath or spirit as otherwise discussed. Instead, feelings that originated in the resident *teyolia* may have been seen to manifest in the liver, or the liver might simply have been one more organ, along with the heart, that was loosely associated with where the *teyolia* resided during life.

Of the three components of the life-complex, by far the least is written about the *ihiyotl* (López Austin 1988:324); however, a couple things suggest that it remained fused with the body after death and disintegrated with it, rather than moving on to an afterworld. One lies in descriptions of corpses and death, including the current Nahua belief in dangerous vapours that emit from a corpse (although the word *ihiyotl* itself is no longer used by the Nahua [Furst 1995:153]), as well as the idea that a remnant of the self can linger after death as a will-o-the-wisp (Furst 1995:162). López Austin (1988: 235–236) suggests that it is because of the *ihiyotl* remaining in the corpse after death that dead body parts, including those of women who died in childbirth, were seen to be powerful and dangerous, and refers to the *ihiyotl* as something that a corpse "emits". This is perhaps why, archaeologically, the bodies of sacrificees are not found close to temples in the way that the heads are, because while making the body powerful, the *ihiyotl* also made it dangerous. This may also be a reason why the Aztecs didn't practice cannibalism, as ingesting the body of another would only be ingesting the dangerous power of the *ihiyotl*, and would have no impact on the self of the dead person nor derive anything positive from that self. At best, drinking blood might pass on *tonalli*, but eating the flesh of a corpse would be likely to do harm to the eater—this could explain why the few aforementioned Nahua narratives of cannibalism feature enemies being tricked into eating human flesh.

The second phenomenon that suggests the embodiment of the *ihiyotl* is the practice of Nagualism, which involved the transfer of the *ihiyotl* from one body to another. Nagualism as

discussed here[24] was the practice wherein a human became an(other) animal (Descola 2013:214). Nagualism is a form of possession, and required the skill of sending one's *ihiyotl* temporarily into the body of an animal or occasionally other physical entity; in pre-Hispanic times, it was something only a skilled sorcerer could do (Descola 2013:216), and often a *nahualli* (Nahuatl; plural *nanahualtin*) could take a few different forms (López Austin 1988:369). Gods have also been said to have been able to possess an animal—including the two wind gods Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca (Furst 1995:93), who could take the forms of ducks and opossums, and skunks and coyotes respectively (López Austin 1988:368)—but more likely this was an act of a god either taking a physical form or otherwise having that physical form/component.

A *nahualli* was a trained specialist (López Austin 1988:374). A certain *tonalli* day-sign could help, as well as extensive training and knowledge, penitence and ritual (López Austin 198:365), yet still, becoming a *nahualli* could not be achieved by everyone. This marks a key difference between the *ihiyotl* and the *tonalli* themselves: while the *tonalli* could easily leave the body—perhaps always ready to escape to the sun—the *ihiyotl* was grounded in the body and to the earth, and only a trained specialist could transfer it from one body to another.

The process of Nagualism did not involve a bodily transformation. From the outside, a sorcerer's human form might be seen to be sleeping (transforming in dreams) or awake but in a meditative or dissociative wakefulness (López Austin 1988:370). López Austin (1988:372) argues that the *ihiyotl* or the breath of the sorcerer was sent into the body of the animal, and that was how one manifested into the other's body. This would make Nagualism a form of possession, or a practice where an element of oneself is put into another body and dominates over the original resident, who is still inside (López Austin 1988:373). There are some accounts from Spaniards in the 1500s of indigenous people dying because of animals being killed, because the indigenous person was a *nahualli* possessing the animal (López Austin 1988:371).

The implications of this for the nature of the *ihiyotl* are these: that the *ihiyotl* was necessary for life, that it stayed with *a* body after death, that it animated the body it was in during life, and that it was a marker for the current location of the self, whether in its original human

[24] Among others, Nagualism may also refer to an animal double born on the same day as a human who shares some of the human's *tonalli* and for whom if either dies the other may die. This, however, was not a belief of the Aztecs (Descola 2013:214), and López Austin calls it *Tonalism* rather than Nagualism (López Austin 1988:374).

body or in a possessed animal. That the *ihiyotl* is sent when an animal's body is possessed shows that the *ihiyotl* was a sort of marker for which body the self was concentrated in (functioning, perhaps, as a greenstone-like link to the *teyolia*), as well as an entity which animated the body that the self was connected to. That a person could die if the animal form ze was possessing died also means that when enabling possession, the *ihiyotl* functioned much as the *tonalli* did in the human body: as a necessary life force that caused death if lost. This also lends support to the idea that the *ihiyotl* never leaves the body it's in after death, or else killing the animal would merely return the *ihiyotl* the sender. Rather, it seems that regardless of if the corpse is of a regular human body or a possessed animal, the *ihiyotl* remains embodied at death. If the *ihiyotl* and *tonalli* are fundamentally similar and complementary entities—the dark and light, the fire and air, the hot *tonalli* and cool *ihiyotl*—it is fitting that the *tonalli* is the vulnerable source of one's lifeforce and animation in zer regular body, while the *ihiyotl* is that predominant lifeforce when in another body, another half, the other side of being.

3.5 — The Aztec Self and Embodiment

To return to the terminological discussion at the start of this chapter, a "self" is the locus for consciousness, awareness, memory, and identity. Although a self can, cross-culturally, have multiple components, and despite the popular opinion that the Aztec self has three, this doesn't seem to be the case within Aztec ontology. The *tonalli* and the *ihiyotl*, the proposed second and third parts of the self, do not relate to any of these aspects of selfhood, and nor is there any loss of self when a person dies and leaves behind zer *tonalli* and *ihiyotl*. While not part of the self, the *tonalli* and the *ihiyotl* were instead a part of *life*, and part of the life-complex necessary for a self to live. In contrast to the idea of "soul", where the disembodied self is what animates and gives life to a body, the *tonalli* and *ihiyotl* instead provide this function, without which the *teyolia* would never live on the earthly plane. Although there is no term for this sort of entity, the relationship is most similar to the Christian concept of body: something which has a temporary link to the self until death, but when, after death, the self departs, the self is still whole. The three entities of the Aztec life-complex worked together in a fragile sort of balance that if disrupted, could cause unhappiness, illness, and even death. Although health, happiness, and life itself were vulnerable to change because of the damage that could be done to these three entities as well as the ease with which a *tonalli* might be lost or life endangered through the *ihiyotl* in Nagualism,

the *teyolia* itself was not vulnerable: no matter how life ended, it went on to some afterlife or another. In this way, it might be said that the natural state of the self or *teyolia* when alone was death.

While the self went on alone and unchanged to an afterworld, both the *tonalli* and the *ihiyotl* stayed, because they were embodied entities. The embodiment of the *ihiyotl* can be seen in how it dies or disintegrates with the body, lingering in a corpse after death and after the departure of the *teyolia*; it is both permanently attached to the (/a) body, and is affected by the body and the body's death (emitting vapours). The embodiment of the *tonalli* can be seen in its presence in blood and hair, as well as, likely, the importance of skulls. The *tonalli* was physically part of the body, and losing parts of the body where the *tonalli* is focussed, like the blood, was an actual loss of *tonalli*. Even when separated from the body, the *tonalli* is still present in these body parts, as in the case of a sorcerer harming someone if ze had access to zer hair, or the use of hair in healing. While part of the divisible *tonalli* could, unlike the *ihiyotl*, temporarily leave the body, it also caused the death of the body, showing their intimate link. Even after death, the *tonalli* forever lingered in the hair of the body.

The Aztec self has been argued to be embodied as well. However, unlike the *tonalli* and the *ihiyotl*, the *teyolia* was not embodied. It was not harmed through autosacrifice, not harmed even through the violence of sacrificial death, and no change to the self is mentioned when the *teyolia* leaves the body and departs for an afterworld. If one's body is part of zer self, then one cannot lose zer body without consequences beyond immateriality to the self, and the *ihiyotl* and *tonalli* aptly demonstrate instances of embodiment that contrast the disembodied *teyolia*.

However, it is worth noting that there are two things that might look similar to embodiment and that have been used as arguments for the embodiment of the Aztec self: the importance of clothing or other superficial modifications to the body, and the practice of flaying. In some cases, these represent the construction and physicality of the *gods* rather than the embodiment of humans, and in others they reflect the importance of visual appearance to the Aztec, and how personhood (not selfhood) could be manipulated in ritual. Clothing was related to class (with sumptuary laws), gender (women had more freedom than men, and skirts were representative of femininity), and the gods (clothing was more powerful if decorated with the designs of a god), and changing clothing was important for the end of a *tlacotli*'s indebted term, the succession of a *tlatoani*, and to mark different age-grades of children (Joyce 2000:474; Klein

2000:9,16,17, 19; López Austin 1988:292, 398, 405). However, associating clothing with different classes, genders, or life transitions does not imply embodiment even if it is related to the social expression of personhood—something seen in that all of these are common in the West—and the fact that power could be given to clothing by invoking the gods says something about the physicality of gods rather than the embodiment of humans.

Flaying was a different case. There, although the skin might also have been powerful because of the *ihiyotl* that lingered in the body after death, wearing skin was powerful because visual appearance was powerful. In contrast to Western biology, organisms were classified solely based on outward characteristics (Clendinnen 1991:223). The importance of flayed skins to the Aztecs is known through various ethnohistoric sources (Sahagún, Durán, etc.), as well as the focus on skins and skulls with those select symbolic animal species found in the Templo Mayor, mentioned previously (López Luján 2005:109), and wearing a skin could lend the strength or prowess of the animal it came from, including when warriors dressed as eagles or cats (Clendinnen 1991:229; López Austin 1988:357). (Byron Hamann (2008) has analyzed flaying further, finding smell to have been of particular import as well.) Flaying was not related to any one god or any one theme (López Luján 2005:218), though Xipe Totec, one of the two main Aztec gods of war (López Luján 2005:220–221), is known as the Flayed Skin God.

Xipe Totec demonstrates the importance of flaying for the gods and *teixiptlahuan.* Xipe Totec, pictured in Figure 3, is always depicted wearing a flayed skin. Clendinnen (1991:233) argues that Xipe Totec is as much a skin as the person wearing it, and that with only one or the other, he would not be Xipe Totec. Skin and the constructed appearance created with it were part of Xipe Totec's identity—just as they were part of his *teixiptlahuan* (called, as people and skin both, *xipeme* [López Austin 1988:378])—and part of the construction of *teixiptlahuan* more generally. It was not the skin or the dress that made a *teixiptlahuan*, but such modifications to outward appearance were part of the transition wherein a human became a human-god.

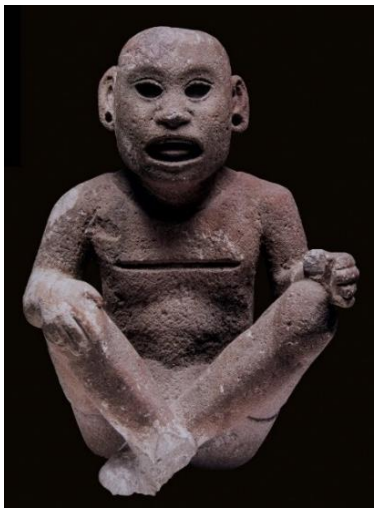

Figure 3. The deity Xipe Totec. The line across the chest is a heart sacrifice seam in the flayed skin being worn. (*Photo by INAH, permission from Pointe-à-Callière museum*.)

That life for a human involved three entities working together in a fragile balance, two of which stayed behind when the self left following death, has implications for what was happening at the moment of death or sacrifice within Aztec ontology. Death was the breaking up of a complex, and sacrifice, as intentional death, was thus an intentional disbanding and destruction of the life-complex in a plea for creation. Three entities, rather than one, were affected by the sacrifice of a single human: one left, a second made heads powerful, and a third— changed and imbalanced by the loss of its complex—made a body dangerous. In that moment of chaos and change, however, it was not so much a self that was being sacrificed, as a life. The three entities of the life-complex disbanded, ending the life and lending power to creation with their destruction, but the self was unharmed. Choosing death meant choosing to break apart a fragile balance that much of one's life was concerned with maintaining, conceding the *teyolia* to its natural, isolated state, in order to help balance another, equally fragile entity: the larger metaphysical ecosystem that included all life, the elements and cycles of nature, and the gods. Just as a human life was susceptible to disbanding through the loss of one's *tonalli*, illnesses or droughts, the Aztec world itself was equally fragile. It is for this reason that the people being sacrificed were often *teixiptlahuan,* adding another layer of meaning to a sacrificial death by enabling the death of a god.

CHAPTER 4 — *Teixiptlahuan* and *Teteo*

Teixiptlahuan (singular: *teixiptla*), otherwise called *teteo ixiptlahuan* or *ixiptlahuan* (Clendinnen 1991:99), were beings who became divine, either a mix of god and human or god and animate object. From a Western ontological perspective, human-based *teixiptlahuan* were people impersonating gods. Nearly all calendrical sacrifices featured the sacrifice of at least one *teixiptla* at the centre of the ritual, including the sacrifices of children to the rain gods (López Luján 2005:13; Román and Chavez 2006:244–245), making an understanding of *teixiptlahuan*, and the ontological context that made them both possible entities and important ones, crucial to an understanding of Aztec sacrifice.

An exploration of the human life-complex reveals certain fragilities that mirror that of the natural world within Aztec ontology, and, as explored in this chapter, the Aztec gods were indivisible from the natural world. While the ontological categories of "god" and "human" could merge in the entity of a *teixiptlahuan* or human-god, gods had a different nature than humans. As explored in the last chapter, both had *tonalli* day-signs, but gods didn't have the *tonalli* as heat and life force. They did not have blood, and yet they were what made human blood—through the gift of the *tonalli* as life force—powerful. They did not have physical bodies and so did not have an *ihiyotl*, and yet they were always at least partly physical. They did not have a *teyolia*, that fundamental aphysical core, and so could never live solely in an afterworld or be entirely aphysical as humans could, and yet some of their physical correlates or physical parts (like mountains) *could* have *teyolia*. They were not alive and yet existed and supported life. The aphysical *teyolia*, in as much a contradiction as the nature of the *teteo*, was something only possessed by those who at one point lived on the physical/earthly plane. Ontologically, this means that there was no definitive boundary between human and god, or nature and the supernatural.

This chapter will build off of these contrasts from the previous chapter to explore the nature of the Aztec *teteo* or gods, the construction and meaning of *teixiptlahuan*, and the implications of the existence and sacrifice of *teixiptlahuan* for the study of Aztec sacrifice. An analysis of *teixiptlahuan* demonstrates how sacrifice could be an act of maintaining life through death and helped to give strength to the natural world and the gods themselves. Through the creation and sacrifice of *teixiptlahuan*, the Aztecs were taking an active role in maintaining existence and maintaining life, despite the fragility and vulnerability of life, their world, and

even their own life-complexes. That sacrificing themselves was a near-futile effort to maintain the balance of life in so fragile a world also means that sacrifice, when viewed in light of the nature of the *teteo* (gods) and what it meant for a *teixiptla*, was an act of hope.

4.1 — The Nature of *Teteo*

The Aztec "teotl", plural "teteo", has generally been translated to mean "god", but what has been meant by "god" has differed substantially over the decades and from scholar to scholar. A popular theory of the 1950s was Hvidtfeldt's comparison of *teotl* with the Polynesian *mana*, which was spread by Townsend (In Bassett 2015:47). Following him came two lineages—that of Alfredo López Austin (1988:377) and then Davíd Carrasco (1999:192; 2014:86) who argued that *teotl* was really a divine energy or force, and that of J. Jorge Klor de Alva and then Kay Almere Read who saw *teotl* as power—both of which are now being challenged (as summarized by Bassett [2015:61–73]). All agreed that *teteo* were connected to the workings of the natural world, but to go further, I argue that Aztec *teteo* predominantly existed in the physical or earthly plane. Deities did not so much grant rain to those who sacrificed people to them, but *were* the rain, strengthened through the sacrifice of *teixiptlahuan.*

While "god" might be a fitting translation for *teotl*, "god" is also a very vague concept. When not equated with the all-powerful person-god of the Abrahamic faiths, "god" can refer to "forces", "powers" or "energies" rather than person-gods, like the Dao, a pantheistic oneness, a Divine Nature, or the Universal Energy of Western New Ageism, among others. "God" has at times been avoided by Aztec scholars lest the Aztec gods be confused with the predominant Abrahamic understanding of "god", and *teotl* has instead been translated as the "sacred" (Hvidtfelds), "divine forces" (López Austin), "power" (Read), and "becoming" (Maffie) based on its compound words (in Bassett 2015:87). As "teotl" is a morpheme it cannot be broken down into parts, and no explicit definition for *teotl* was ever recorded from Nahua people (Bassett 2015:90); however, in his analysis of its various usages, Sahagún (1981:87) muses that *teotl* might refer to something that was "consummate in good or in evil".

On one hand, a superficial reading of research on the Aztecs might suggest that they had a straightforward understanding of "god" and recognized a pantheon of person-gods whom they worshipped and made sacrifices to. On the other hand, analyzing these entities more closely makes this simple understanding of "god' fall easily apart. For the purpose of more deeply

analyzing the Aztec understanding of "teteo" or "gods", "deity" will be used differently in this chapter, to refer to the named human-like deities that included Huitzilopochtli and Chalchiuhtlicue. These deities, one aspect of *teteo,* were present in the terrestrial world—speaking to people, inhabiting the landscape, causing illnesses, and appearing in/as/through *teixiptlahuan* (Bassett 2015:88).

However, the simplicity of these deities is complicated almost from the outset because they did not have clear identities, names, or genders. "Gods did not have absolute individuality. They fused and unfolded; they changed attributes and names," wrote López Austin (1988:241). The deity Ometecuhtli is seen as an earlier aspect of Huitzilopochtli (Klein 2000:19), while Huitzilopochtli has been argued to be an aspect of Tezcatlipoca (Clendinnen 1991:299). Coyolxauhqui has been argued to be a younger version of Cihuacoatl, and Cihuacoatl and Coatlicue as the same god (Broda 1987:103–104). Coatlicue, who is also called Teteo Innan and Toci, has also been related to the earth god Tlaltecuhtli (Brumfiel 2008:94; Clendinnen 1991:200), as well as Cihuacoatl and the Cihuateteo (Clendinnen 1991:298), etc. In relation to sex or gender, many deities have been described as both male and female (like Tlaltecuhtli) or had male and female versions of their names, the god of corn began as female and became male, and many other gods had male/female aspects or sibling/partner pairs, like Tlaloc and Chalchiuhtlicue (Clendinnen 1991:168; Klein 2000:46). To explain this collective confusion of identity, López Austin (1988:241) argues that Aztec deities were named more for their actions than any individual identity. However, it is also true that Aztec deities are often identified based solely on their insignia, despite the many problems with this method (Bassett 2015:82), including that is fragile that one deity can be identified as another with the change of only one accessory, like a headdress (Furst 1995:17). Regarding sex or gender, it's possible that the genders of deities were added or changed during the colonial period, something which happened with some gods like the Tzitzimime (Klein 2000:3), and that deities were either agender or gender fluid because they did not possess the *teyolia* that was the loci of gender. More likely, this fluidity of deities and the calling of so many deities as aspects of others likely derives from two issues: a lack of individuality of these entities, and a lack of understanding of the full nature of Aztec gods, which were far more than these superficial deities.

Aztec gods were as much physical entities as they were deities, if the deity-aspect of them was not more than just a personification of the physical. A clear place where this can be

seen is in the festival of Huei Tozoztli, where actual cobs of corn and human *teixiptlahuan* of the corn god Cinteotl are both seen as the same thing and treated in the same way, with no apparent discernment between the words "maize" and "maize god" in the Florentine Codex (Sahagún 1981:62). Similarly, "ehecatl" is both the ordinary Nahuatl word for "wind", *and* the name of the wind deity Ehecatl (an aspect of Quetzalcoatl) (Furst 1995:139). What these examples suggest is that either physical natural entities like wind and corn actually *were* the gods, and the deities are only personifications of them, or that wind and the deity Ehecatl, and corn and the deity Cinteotl, are each aspects of the same *teotl* which is both and neither of these things. The former is supported by the following passage from the Florentine Codex, when it describes the material *teixiptlahuan* of mountains being formed: "And he who formed mountains made their image only of amaranth seed dough, made in human form, made to look like men" (Sahagún 1981:2:47), suggesting that while the mountains were being turned into human-like *teixiptlahuan*, the original *teotl* was the mountain itself (or something that didn't otherwise "look like men"). In a reversal of more common ontological understandings, "god", for the Aztecs, might have been predominantly a physical phenomenon, just as life was, while "human" selves were fundamentally aphysical.

Further exploring this broader understanding of "god" for the Aztecs, Bassett (2015:91–127) analyzes the various words where "teotl" is used as a prefix, to propose the following five properties of *teteo*: 1) they have domains and property over which they have control (e.g. rivers belong to Chalchiuhtlicue); 2) they have *tonalli* day-signs; 3) they have privileges (*neixcahuilli*, e.g. sumptuary goods); 4) they are respected because they are feared (*mahuiztic*); and 5) they are precious or valuable like turquoise and gold. While the first one prioritizes the deity over the physical entity, the rest still make sense if this is reversed to preference the physical understanding of "god". Rivers and water, for example, could be respected and feared sources of power that the Aztecs depended on, they were seen as valuable and deserving of certain tribute, they are all "owned" by or part of the same concept, and they have certain characteristics and realms of existence as suggested by a day-sign. Such natural powers or gods also had variable power that was seen to grow and diminish, requiring death and rebirth to strengthen them, which is where the killing of gods through *teixiptlahuan*, the killing of these forces upon which the Aztecs were so critically dependant, comes in (López Austin 1988:376–367).

4.2 — *Teixiptlahuan*

The existence of *teixiptlahuan* challenges the boundary between the ontological categories of "human" and "god" to show that for the Aztecs they weren't mutually exclusive; it also emphasizes that within the Aztec world, the "gods" were not all-powerful entities to whom they could look for help. Just as a human self was connected to the greater physical world during life through the *ihiyotl* and *tonalli* of the body, a god was always a part of that physical world and helped to create it as mountains and rivers, rain and corn. *Teixiptlahuan* existed, and needed to exist, because of the fluctuating power of the gods and the variable cycles of the natural world. They needed to exist because without them, the rainy season would not have the strength to come and be reborn, and their food would not grow to feed them. *Teixiptlahuan*, carefully constructed entities which united human and god or even object and god in one crucial ritual moment, needed to be sacrificed in order to sustain the fragile balance on which the Aztec people depended, demonstrating simultaneously the power and vulnerability of the Aztec people in their necessary daily relationships with the gods.

From the predominant ontological perspective of the theistic modern-day West, "god" and "human" are mutually exclusive categories, and the human body is owned by the individual and autonomous self (Fowler 2004:3). These two views make *teixiptlahuan* impossible entities. It is because of these ontological understandings, assumed uncritically, that "god-impersonator" has become the dominant translation for *teixiptla* in Aztec literature. This translation carries with it the particular ontological perspective contained in the word "impersonator"—defined as "one who impersonates or plays a part; an actor of a dramatic character" by the Oxford English Dictionary[25]—which posits that one can only *act* like someone or something else, rather than become it. Better translations include "individuals or objects whose essence had been cosmo-magically transformed into gods" and "living images of gods" (Carrasco 1999:83, 84), and "localized embodiments" (of *teteo*) (Bassett 2015:90).

The morphology of *teixiptla* is a little more helpful. The word "teixiptla" has three components: *te-* is a prefix denoting possession (e.g. *someone's* image); *ixtli* means surface; and *xip,* means flaying, which together mean a *teixiptla* is literally "someone's surface-flayed thing", or an entity characterized by its skin/flayed surface (Bassett 2015:77,132), reflecting the element of construction involved in creating a *teixiptla*. "Teixiptla" also has two potential root words

[25] Retrieved July 5th, 2018 from http://www.oed.com/

which have fuelled some of the debate in its translation: either *ixiptlatl*, which has been translated as representative or substitute, or *ixiptlayotl*, which has been translated as likeness or image (Bassett 2015:55–56), thus a represent*ative* or a represent*ation*. By creating a human-god, partly through active construction and the manipulation of a being's exterior surface, *teixiptlahuan* can be seen as the representatives of gods or components of gods.

The role of a *teixiptla* was the role of a god, and they were treated with due deference and even called upon to bless children (López Austin 1988:357,377). Some of the gender fluidity of the gods also appears to have carried over into the creation of human-based *teixiptlahuan* as well, as in some rituals the skin of a female was worn by a male to make a female *teixiptla* (including Carrasco 1999:206–207; Sahagún 1981:2:186–187), or a female human dressed as a male to become the *teixiptla* of a male god (López Austin 1988:357). Depending on the ritual, the lifespan of a *teixiptla* might span from a couple days to four years (López Austin 1988:377), and frequently they weren't sacrificed but instead transformed back (e.g. priests often became *teixiptlahuan* for the duration of a ritual [Clendinnen 1991:249]).

Teixiptlahuan or god-representatives were frequently formed out of objects rather than humans, and these *teixiptlahuan*—here "object-gods" is a better description—were no less important than the human ones. *Teixiptlahuan* could be constructed out of materials like wood, stone and dough, and different types of *teixiptlahuan* could exist in the same ritual. For example, in the aforementioned Huei Tozoztli, human-god *teixiptlahuan* and object-god *teixiptlahuan*—as well as actual corn—are all identified with the corn-god Cinteotl (Sahagún 1981:2:62). Bassett (2015) identifies the *tecpame* from the Templo Mayor offerings as examples of material *teixiptlahuan*, where the eyes, teeth and mouths are reflections of the animacy of the knives as well as their completed transformation into *teixiptlahuan* (154–155), and it is possible that the same situation applies to the skull masks found in the Templo Mayor (López and López 2008:140), and that they too were animate (Figure 2). The giving of eyes and mouths, as well as clothing, insignias and names, was part of the construction of object-based *teixiptlahuan*, and part of the process wherein they became alive or animate and able to see and consume: the physical transformation was necessary for the transformation of being (Bassett 2015:161,200). The treatment of these object-based *teixiptlahuan* was very similar to that of the human-based: while human-based *teixiptlahuan* might have been mobile and thus more dramatic, they were not

seen to be more important than other *teixiptlahuan* (Clendinnen 1991:252), something which reflects that the divine transformations of both were the same.

Archaeologically, there are a couple instance where we have found objects that appear to have been killed as *teixiptlahuan*, supporting these ideas. One is at the Templo Mayor: López Luján (2005:200–201) observes half a dozen offerings where severely fragmented ceramic incense burners appear to have been killed by being intentionally shattered. More similarly to other accounts of *teixiptlahuan*, at the southern Aztec site of Teopanzolco in a burial of dismembered and beheaded humans, there are intentionally dismembered and beheaded ceramic figurines treated in the same way as the humans (Lagunas and Serrano 1972:431). These demonstrate what the ethnohistoric data suggest: that the construction of *teixiptlahuan* was not only a process that collapsed any ontological boundary between human and god, but also object and god, and human and object. Because humans were also fragile, this collapse only emphasizes the shared fragility of the Aztec cosmos—humans, life, and the gods together—and adds another element of uncertainty to any sacrifice even being effective.

How that collapse of divisions of being happened is more complicated, because it lies outside of the possibilities of modern Western ontology, where human, object, and god are all fundamentally different and mutually exclusive entities. One question which might readily be asked upon the discovery of the existence of *teixiptlahuan* or specifically the humans who become human-gods is—what happens to the self who was there before the transformation? Is ze ousted by a deity who takes over zer body? Does ze share the body, with or without shared control of it? Does ze cease to exist temporarily? Does ze merge with the invading entity?

López Austin (1988:376) answers this question with "possession", which, as defined by Descola (2013:214), is the overriding of the self by the introduction of a foreign entity, which takes temporary control and changes one's personality. This would mean that the human self is still in the body but no longer in control of it, and would make a *teixiptla* similar or identical to a *nahualli* (López Austin 1988:357), although no primary sources give them as translations for each other (Bassett 2015:66). The problem with this explanation is that it makes three assumptions that do not fit with Aztec ontology: it assumes that two beings cannot merge; that gods have selves like humans; and that humans and gods must always remain separate entities.

Bassett (2015), more recently, argued that *teixiptlahuan* were avatars or embodiments of gods rather than representations of them (133). She argued that *teixiptlahuan* are physical

counterparts of conceptual *teteo*, a "manifest[ation]" of them (Bassett 2015:138), and that *teixiptlahuan* were possessions *of* rather than possessed *by*, a god. However, while Bassett challenges the assumption that a god cannot be physical, she still does not address how or if the human merges with the god, and assumes that a *teotl* is fundamentally conceptual or aphysical. She sees *teixiptlahuan* as physical avatars of gods, rather than as only one of many physical aspects of a predominantly or even exclusively physical entity.

However, there is no reason to think that the physical (aspects of) Aztec *teteo* were secondary to the aphysical *teteo* or aphysical concept or personification of *teteo*, called here the "deities". Cinteotl was a deity with certain accoutrements and associations, and yet corn *was* Cinteotl. Corn *was* powerful, and as an entity that the Aztecs depended on for life, was, to a degree, an entity that had power over them. Through the ambiguity of naming and the fluidity expressed in *teixiptlahuan*, a "god" was clearly, to the Aztecs, a less grandiose entity than the popular Abrahamic understanding of the word. The idea that these entities were not mutually exclusive from humans is also supported by the fact that in a number of Aztec histories it is unclear whether the subjects being discussed were humans or gods (Bassett 2015:63). An Aztec god was not omnipotent but instead had variable strength, a variability that the Aztecs could suffer from because of their dependence on the gods of/that were corn and rain, and this, in turn, created the need for sacrifice.

Contrary to the *teixiptlahuan*-were-possessed theory, *teixiptlahuan* represented a union of the Aztec understanding of "human" and "god", where the human changed, but there was no plurality of self. An example that illustrates this point of union is that "xihuitl" was the Aztec word for common, unimpressive or ugly turquoise, while "teo-xihuitl" is *teotl* turquoise, turquoise which is rare and beautiful and valuable and respected (Bassett 2015:106–107). Like this, a *teixiptla* could be a human in a perfected form just as turquoise could exist in a perfected form, a human that is changed and augmented by the powers and domains of a *teotl*, and embodies beauty and power and respect like any other *teotl* entity. Because ze embodied a specific *teotl* rather than *teteo* generally, more specifically a *teixiptla* would fulfill a certain role within a certain domain of power, connected to and embodying the force and power of rain/the rainy season in the case of child sacrifices to the rain gods or maize in the case of Cinteotl. No plurality of self, no possession, and no internal conflict were thus necessary to form a *teixiptla*.

What all of this means for sacrifice is that calendrical sacrifices were never made *to* a god, but instead were *of* a god or god-aspect, and that, according to Aztec ontology, "human" sacrifice was actually very rare. The nature of *teteo*, as predominantly or entirely physical beings, also changes what death itself was. If a *teteo* was entirely located on the earthly plane, then the idea that a sacrificed child went to help the rain deities of Tlalocan, or that someone who went to Mictlan went to the deities Mictlantecuhtli and Mictecacihuatl who ruled over Mictlan (Bassett 2015:97; López Austin 1988:335), would mean something quite different. López Austin (1988:335) notes that people who went to Tlalocan were seen as "gods", and helped the deities Tlaloc and Chalchiuhtlicue. However, perhaps they helped Tlaloc and Chalchiuhtlicue by lending strength to their domain—by empowering rain, water, mountains and storms—and not by helping them as a human might help another human. In this way, a dead, immaterial human self (a *teyolia*) would provide the immaterial backing and strength to a god or "natural" phenomenon, and thus fill a role that in other ontologies would be part of how "gods" are defined. While deities could be weak, and human life was fragile, a *teyolia* after death was not fragile and, in addition, had the power to help the rain gods or help the sun across the sky; in this way, a dead human might have had, in some ways, more power than a god. They weren't, however, separate or competing: the *teyolia* of the dead, said to help the sun across the sky or help the rain gods, might have given the gods at least as much power as the act of sacrificial death and rebirth itself.

An exploration of Aztec gods and *teixiptlahuan* reveals the same fragility and the same uncertainty in the gods as there was in life for the Aztec people themselves. Just as human life was fragile both because of the fragility of the life-complex and their dependency on (the gods of) corn and rain and health and the powers of the "natural" world, which for them was at once supernatural, the gods themselves were not a sure support the Aztecs could look to. While they were more powerful and were powers that the Aztecs depended on, they too could be weakened and fail without sustenance and rebirth. Children needed to be sacrificed in order to give strength to the rainy season, and corn and corn *teixiptlahuan* needed to be sacrifice in order to strengthen the harvest. In this way, the Aztecs were at once acknowledging their dependency on these forces and attempting to strengthen them through sacrifice, taking an active role in the continuation of their world and life itself, and yet doing so plagued with the uncertainty that it might not work.

Exploring the nature of *teteo*, the human self, and *teixiptlahuan*, helps to elucidate some of the ontological complexity around what was happening during sacrifice. It demonstrates the vulnerability and weakness of both humans and gods, and that gods could not be looked to as sure sources of power or help. Because the self was immaterial and life and the immaterial world were fragile, it also suggests a certain power to *teyolia* after death that might have created that of the gods. Through this ontological exploration, sacrifice is shown to be an act of transmuting a human life into the strength of a god, both in the moment of sacrifice and in the strength lent by the dead human after the fact, or more generally an act of transmuting death into life. It was an offering for a larger cause, in a fight for the continuation of life. It was also, however, incredibly difficult emotionally, as can be seen through the sacrifice of children.

CHAPTER 5 — Child Sacrifices

The calendrical sacrifices of *teixiptlahuan* were incredibly important because of various ontological truths of the Aztecs—that the gods were not omnipotent, that the cycles of the natural world were not dependable, and that a human could become a human-god and lend strength to the cosmos. However, despite this importance, sacrifice could still be very difficult emotionally for the Aztecs. The sacrifice of children, who in the case of rain-god sacrifices were also *teixiptlahuan*, demonstrates this, as well as demonstrating that within Aztec religion, children were respected and valued similarly to adults. This means that rather than only giving information about child sacrifices specifically, analyzing child rain-god sacrifices gives new information about the experience of human sacrifice more generally. It demonstrates what the Aztecs were willing to give up for their metaphysical cause, that sacrifice was something that affected all demographics of people just as its metaphysical effects did, and that because these sacrifices could be emotionally difficult to perform, they were also a demonstration of resilience.

This chapter will be divided into two parts. First, the archaeological data for children sacrificed to the rain gods will be analyzed in depth (5.1), revealing that the children chosen for these sacrifices were often ill, male, and chosen in part for their age-grade. Secondly (5.2), these sacrifices will be interpreted through an analysis of the Aztec's understanding of "child" to reveal that the sacrifice of children was very similar to the sacrifice of adults, that sacrifice was a communal enterprise, and that ritual sacrifices could be emotional sacrifices as well.

5.1 — Archaeological Analyses

Although, as established in chapter 2, half of the child remains found from the Aztec Empire are from contexts that aren't associated with the Aztec rain gods, the sacrifice of young children to the rain gods is still the largest category of child remains found, and thus one of the best supported types of sacrifice, both archaeologically and ethnohistorically, from the Aztec Empire. Section 5.11 will outline general information on these sacrifices, including presenting the archaeological deposits. Sections 5.12–5.14 will compare the Tlaloc sacrifice at the Templo Mayor and the Ehecatl Temple sacrifice in Tlatelolco: comparing ages in 5.12, sex in 5.13, and health in 5.14. Together, these reveal that, on one hand, most children sacrificed to the rain gods were male and less healthy than usual, and, on the other, that these two sacrifices were not the same, and that different criteria were used to choose the children between them, resulting in different ages, sexes and health profiles.

5.11 — Rain-God Sacrifices: General Information and Archaeological Contexts

Ethnohistorically, children are said to have been sacrificed for at least four months of the year leading up to the wet season (Sahagún says four; Motolinía/Benavente and Durán say five [López Luján 2005:152]) in order to make the rains come. The details of how many children were sacrificed, how young they were, and where they were sacrificed are sometimes not included in these accounts and are not agreed on when they are, though Sahagún writes that at least in the first month, seven children, including six males and one female, were sacrificed (Sahagún 1981:2:44). These sacrifices were in the name of the Tlalocs or rain deities, chief among them Chalchiuhtlicue (female) and Tlaloc (male). Sacrifices were also made to Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl, the wind god, because wind was understood to precede the rain (Román 1999:13).

Three deposits of these children have been found archaeologically, and all three are in or beside temples. The first deposit was found at the bottom of the Temple of Ehecatl in Tlatelolco, and includes 30–37 children (Cruz et al [2008:519] versus Román and Chavez [2006:241]) as well as some adults. The second and largest rain-god deposit was found in an offering inside the Templo Mayor. There, an estimated 42 children were found inside of a box that included various water-associated items like marine sand, blue pigment, and water jars shaped like Tlaloc (López Luján 2005:152), creating the Tlaloc association for this sacrifice. The third deposit was found in

1900 by Leopoldo Batres near the Metropolitan Cathedral in Mexico City; like the sacrifice in Tlatelolco, this deposit also seems to be in associated with a temple of the wind-god Ehecatl (Batres 1902:22), and it includes 20 children (Rodríguez-Fernández et al 1999:663). This latter deposit has the least information available, so it won't be analyzed in depth.

While these three deposits demonstrate that children were sacrificed for the rain, they do not clearly support either the frequency or the quantity of child sacrifice that the ethnohistoric sources attest. On one hand, finding only a few deposits could mean that these sacrifices were only during droughts or otherwise not annual, but on the other, the numbers of children sacrificed far *exceed* what is predicted ethnohistorically for any one month, with sacrificee numbers—of 43, 37, 20—that are more in line with annual, rather than monthly, historical estimates. (The deposits at both the Templo Mayor [López Luján 2005:266] and the Ehecatl Temple [Cruz et al 2008:519–520] are primary, with the bones in anatomical positioning, meaning that the children were buried simultaneously or nearly so, and so could not have been a collection from multiple dates.) Both the deposit in the Templo Mayor and beside the Ehecatl Temple date to Stage IV of the Templo Mayor, ca. 1438–1467, making it possible that the children in these deposits were sacrificed during a great drought and famine of the 1450s (Guillem 1999 in Román and Chavez 2006:244; López Luján 2005:156). Regardless of whether these particular deposits were special, however, if rain-god children were being sacrificed annually, their underrepresentation archaeologically suggests that their remains were buried elsewhere, perhaps on the mountaintops where they are sometimes said to have been sacrificed (López Luján 2005:153; Sahagún 1981:2:44).

5.12 — Ages

The ages of children at the Tlaloc deposit in the Templo Mayor versus the Ehecatl Temple deposit in Tlatelolco differed. Although all of the sacrificees from the Templo Mayor (Román 1986 in López Austin 2005:151) and most from the Tlatelolco sacrifice (Cruz et al. 2008) were under the age of 7, Figure 4 shows that the distribution of ages therein varied substantially: most of the sacrifices at Tlatelolco were under the age of 3, whereas most of the children at the Templo Mayor were between the ages of 4 and 6 and very few were under 3. In Figure 4, data from Román 1986 (in López Austin 2005:151) is used for the Templo Mayor offering ages, and data from Cruz et al (2008) are used for the Tlatelolco deposit. The N-value

for Tlatelolco is only 32 in the figure because the six adults found with the children are not included, in addition to a handful of fragmentary children who couldn't be aged. Following Figure 4 is Table 4, which contrasts the age data for Tlatelolco for the two competing papers by Cruz et al (2008) and Román and Chavez (2006), and also includes the adult remains which were removed from Figure 4.

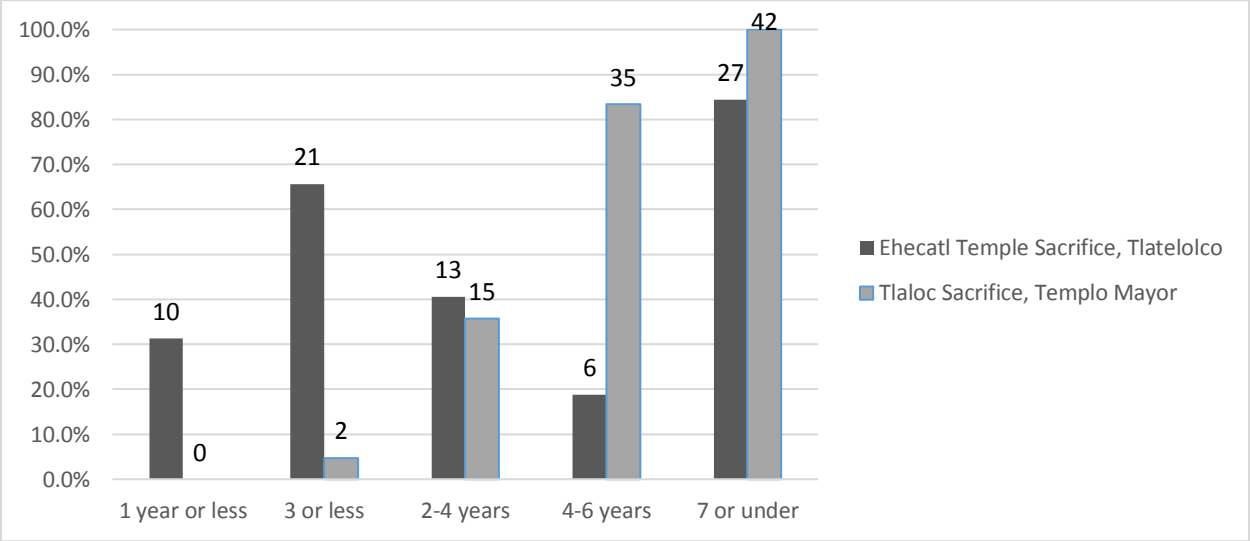

Figure 4. Percentages of Sub-adult Sacrificees by Age in the Tlatelolco (N=32) and Templo Mayor (N=42) rain-god deposits.

Table 4. Age bins for the Ehecatl Temple sacrifice in Tlatelolco: Contrasting Cruz et al's (2008) numbers with Roman and Chavez's (2006) numbers.

Age Bin	Cruz et al 2008 (N:43)	Roman and Chavez 2006 (N:41)
Sub-Adult	86%	73%
Adults and Teenagers	19%	27%
Adults	14%	27%

Overall, the differences in the average ages of children between these two deposits (excluding the adults from Tlatelolco), is not statistically significant, to 95% confidence (t=.42). However, their variances are very different (s=17.3 at Tlatelolco, and s=1.4 at the Templo Mayor), which reflects a difference in the distribution or concentration of ages represented: as shown in Figure 4, most children in the Templo Mayor deposit are between the ages of 3 and 7,

while most children in the Tlatelolco deposit are 3 or under. The variance difference reflects that Tlatelolco had more very young and older (8–15-year-old) children that balanced out the average age. Thus, it seems clear from these data that different age categories of children were being chosen at each location.

Rather than having a simple ontological division between adults and children, in Classic and Postclassic Mesoamerica, childhood was divided into three stages of about four yeas each with adulthood being reached at around age 12 (Ardren 2006:9); among the Aztec, Joyce has confirmed a similar structure, with adulthood starting at about 13 (Joyce 2000:474–478). These age-grades will be analyzed in more depth in section 5.2 as the Aztec concept of "child" is examined, but here it is important to note that the first stage (of infancy or nursing), would have ended at about 3–4 years old, while the second stage would have ended between the ages of 7 and 9.

These age bins coincide with the ages of the children in the two rain-god deposits—most of the children in the Tlatelolco sacrifice were from the first stage of life (with perhaps half a dozen from Stage 2 and 1–3 people from Stage 3, as aged in Cruz et al [2008:521]) while those at the Templo Mayor were predominantly or entirely from stage two, and both were almost entirely comprised of the first two age grades (7 or under). Since ethnohistoric sources rarely specify the age of the children who were sacrificed, this difference is neither predicted nor denied by the ethnohistoric data, and no explanations for such a difference are given. However, what this difference suggests, at least when it comes to their details, is that "rain god sacrifices" should not all be lumped together as near-identical phenomena, even when only speaking of especially large ones associated with temples or seemingly made during exceptional years.

The reason for different age-grades of children being selected for each sacrifice could have been entirely a result in differences between Tlaloc and Ehecatl. A simple explanation could be that younger children were chosen for the wind god because wind precedes rain and younger children precede older ones. Another possibility is that the children were chosen for possessing certain characteristics of the deities, which might mean that the wind god Ehecatl was associated with one or more of the Stage 1 characteristics of dependency, liminality, a lack of connection to the earth and food, or a connection to women/mothers. Stage-2-and-up children ate hard food and thus had a direct connection with maize, the harvest, and the rain that enabled

them (Clendinnen 1991:191), which could explain why they made better representatives of Tlaloc.

5.13 — Sex

In addition to differences in ages, there are differences in the proportion of females between the Templo Mayor and the Ehecatl sacrifices; while Román (1986; in López Luján 2005:150) identifies 22 of the Templo Mayor children as male and 6 as female, only one female child is found out of 32 sexed children at the Ehecatl Temple—a much lower proportion of females.

However, the sex of the children and the adults at the Ehecatl sacrifice is debated. Román and Chavez (2006) identify 1/30 children and 5/11 adults as female (and anticipate that their methods would over-exaggerate males), while Cruz et al (2008) identify 1/32 children as female (and they doubt even that one), and 0/6 adults as female. These differences could be partly from the misidentification of (gracile) sub-adult skeletons as adult female skeletons or vise versa, but both sets of authors used DNA analysis for the sexing: Román and Chavez used the absence of Y-chromosome markers (they extracted DNA from the ribs and vertebra) and Cruz et al analyzed a gene (amelogenin) which varies in length between the X and Y chromosome, extracted from rib bones (Cruz et al 2008:519; Román and Chavez 2006:243–244).

Either way, the percentage of female children at Tlatelolco is 3%, which is far lower[26] than the 21% of children found in the Templo Mayor deposit (Table 5), or the 36% of sexed adults that were female. One argument for the low frequency of females in these sacrifices is that both Tlaloc and Ehecatl were male gods, and the children, as *teixiptlahuan* of those gods, would have been chosen in part for possessing certain attributes—like sex—of them (Román and Chavez 2006:244–245). However, in addition to the mention of a female child rain god sacrificee

[26] The data from Román and Rodríguez (1997) suggest a far higher percentage of women. Román and Rodríguez do an analysis of dental diseases from the Ehecatl Temple sacrifice, Templo Mayor sacrifice, and Metropolitan Cathedral sacrifice, as well as one child from the Palacio Nacional using a higher number of women than in any other study reviewed by the author of these deposits, including by Román. Unfortunately, Román and Rodríguez (1997) do not give the ages and sexes of their subsamples (or the original deposits, whose numbers have been debated over time), nor do they specify how they sexed their remains. However, it is worth noting that the following can be deducted from their data table: at least 27 women are included in their subsamples, including at least 6 females from the Templo Mayor and at least 2 females from Tlatelolco, with a maximum of seven people from the cathedral being female and one from the Palacio Nacional, leaving a proportion of female remains at Tlatelolco and the Templo Mayor of at least 40%.

in the Florentine Codex (Sahagún 1981:2:44) and the existence of female rain deities like Chalchiuhtlicue, this explanation simply does not hold up to a more comprehensive understanding of *teixiptlahuan*, established in Chapter 4, wherein they were constructed entities. In fact, because of the malleability of gender in their construction, where men could be turned into female *teixiptla* and vice versa, skeletal or genetic sex is not a trustworthy source of determining whether the sacrificee was male or female when they died. Instead, it is possible that there were two steps in the sacrifice of these people that both carried ontological weight. The first, the choosing of the children and adults to be sacrificed, could have helped to create balance in and of itself: by sacrificing more males, you sacrificed dryness (because of the association between males and dryness established in Chapter 3), and by sacrificing dryness, you helped to create a balance wherein there was enough wetness. Then, once these sacrificees had become *teixiptlahuan* (of whatever gender or created sex), they had a different, far stronger significance: they were gods in human form whose death allowed the death and rebirth of a god—the death and rebirth of the rain itself.

Table 5. Sex Percentage in Rain-God Sacrifices;
N=38 and 41 at Tlatelolco, N=28 at the Templo Mayor

Age	Tlatelolco[a]		Templo Mayor[b]	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Children	97%	3%	79%	21%
Adults	100% or 55%	0% or 45%		
Both	97% or 85%	3% or 15%		

Note: Only sexed remains are included.

[a] Cruz et al 2008 versus Roman and Chavez 2006

[b] Román 1986 in López Luján 2005:150 (*not a DNA analysis)*

5.14 — Diseases

Children in these rain-god deposits were also sicker than usual, suggesting that this was another factor that could influence how they were chosen to be *teixiptlahuan.* Most of them had diseases, bone pathologies, and dental maladies, and while the rain deities could claim servants by killing them with water-related illnesses (Román 2008:58), it is not those illnesses, by and large, that are found. Differences were found in the health of the children between the different rain-god sacrifices, with each having higher numbers of some maladies and lower numbers of

others, which suggests that—as already demonstrated in the different age grades between the Templo Mayor and Tlatelolco sacrifices—the children were selected differently for each sacrifice.

The closest data we have from a similar context to which the health of these children can be compared is a collection of 236 skeletons of mixed demographics from Cholula, a contemporary city to Tenochtitlan with a similar life expectancy and located in the neighbouring Puebla Basin. These skeletons are markedly healthier than the sacrificed children (Márquez et al 2002:318–319). In addition to having more maladies than are estimated for the general population at the time based on the contemporary Cholula data, these children were less healthy than other Aztec sacrificees in Tenochtitlan. Ximena Chavez Balderas summarizes that these were sick children, while generally the remains in the (other) Templo Mayor deposits were of healthy people (Chavez 2007:12; Román and Chavez 2006:241). The reason for sacrificing less-healthy children may be the same rationale for sacrificing males: that in addition to sacrificing dryness for wetness and death for life, they were also offering up disease for health.

The most common dental ailment found at the sites of the Metropolitan Cathedral (the third rain-god sacrifice site, also associated with Ehecatl), Tlatelolco and the Templo Mayor were first degree caries in nearly half, followed by dental calculus (Román and Rodríguez 1997) (Table 6). By contrast, the rate of caries was only 8–14% in the Cholula collection (Márquez et al 2002:334). Enamel hypoplasia—lines on the teeth that usually indicate past nutritional stress—was found even more prevalently in these three rain-god deposits, appearing in the majority. By sharp contrast, enamel hypoplasia was found in none of the subadults at Cholula, and only 19% of both adult men and women (Márquez et al 2002:324). Note that most of the sacrificees from Cholula were working-class commoners (Márquez et al 2002:318), and so probably did not have exceptionally good teeth.

TABLE 6. Relative Frequencies of the Most Common Dental Conditions in Rain-God Sacrifices at Tlatelolco (N=22), the Templo Mayor (N=26), and the Metropolitan Cathedral (N=8).

Dental Condition	Tlatelolco	Templo Mayor	Metropolitan Cathedral
Enamel hypoplasia	50%	88%	13%
1st degree Caries	50%	46%	38%
Calculus	9%	35%	88%

Note: There were a few adults in the Tlatelolco sample, and four in the Cathedral sample.
Source: Roman and Rodríguez 1997

Caries were found fairly evenly across the three sites, but enamel hypoplasia was found disproportionately at the Templo Mayor (89% to the 50% at Tlatelolco, and 13% at the Metropolitan Cathedral), and dental calculus was found at the cathedral disproportionately (75% compared to 35% at the Templo Mayor and 9% at Tlatelolco). Most of the differences between these three sites can't be explained by their different age demographics—Román (2008:64) found that adult remains had the same dental diseases as children, though they also had age-related illnesses like arthritis—and instead, it seems likely that this is another difference in how the sacrificees were chosen (whether because it was directly selected for or related to something else that was). The explanation that these sacrificees were chosen from different populations in the Aztec Empire, perhaps from outside the capital or from communities of different wealth, is possible, but it is checked by Murillo (2006) and Hernandez's (2006) research that found that sacrificees from within versus without Tenochtitlan had a similar frequency of ailments (in Román 2008:61).

Apart from dental maladies, wounds and fractures (especially in adult males) were quite common, as well as signs of infectious diseases like tuberculosis, leprosy and syphilis, and joint conditions like arthritis (Román 2008:63–64). Also amongst the children at the Templo Mayor were also those with signs of parasitism and gastrointestinal diseases (López and López 2008:140). Hyperostosis in the bones, most often caused from anemia or nutrient deficiency, as well as by some parasites and illnesses, was represented in exactly half of the 42 children at the Templo Mayor (Román Berrelleza 1986 in López Austin 2005:151), while the Cholulan remains had only a 31% rate of hyperostosis (Márquez et al 2002:321). However, Postclassic remains from the Maya site of Playa del Carmen yield comparable numbers to the Templo Mayor

deposit: with 48% of people having porotic hyperostosis, and with higher rates in men (Márquez et al 2002:323).

While the children in these deposits do appear sicker than usual, none of these ailments match those associated with the rain gods, although it is true that anemia and dental problems (etc.) can herald overall poor health, and that dental diseases can cause other ailments. In the Cholula skeletons, Márquez et al (2002:321, 323) note that both porotic hyperostosis and cribra orbitali were more than twice as common in subadults and children as in adults, suggesting that children who had them often died before adulthood, perhaps because the high rates of anemia in subadults made surviving the diseases that caused hypoplasias more difficult. Román (2008:672–63) also notes that respiratory illnesses like colds, some kinds of lung and ear infections, throat infections, and digestive problems like gastritis and ulcers can all be caused, catalyzed or worsened by dental diseases like those found in these assemblages. However, while it is possible that the children being sacrificed were being sacrificed because they showed signs of being marked by the rain (and thus, their selection would have been quite straightforward), this idea is not well supported at present.

An alternative explanation is that these children weren't sacrificed because they were marked by the rain gods, but because they were marked by *any* of the gods. Most illnesses were caused by the gods, not only the ones associated with the rain gods, with some exceptions for the work of human sorcerers and physical wounds like battle injuries which had no ulterior cause (Román 2008:56). The Aztecs did not only acknowledge, respect and support gods which/who did positive things, but those that could hurt humans as well, and all of them did both—that the rain/rain-gods who caused crops to grow also caused various diseases is a good example of this. Power was power, and the power to cause death and disability was respected in the same breath as the power to cause birth and health. Ill children might actually have been seen as more powerful, when it came to religious rituals, than children who were healthy, because they were more connected to the gods. Perhaps this made the process of changing them into *teixiptlahuan*, gods given the form of a human in order to die, easier.

5.2 — Child Sacrifice

Now that the archaeological data for child sacrifice has been examined and the commonality of child sacrifice established, this section will interpret the sacrifices of children

more broadly by drawing on a knowledge of *teixiptlahuan* and the ontological category of "child". This section is divided into three parts. First (5.21), the ontological and cultural constructions of "child" and "childhood" are explored in the West in order to help deconstruct ontological assumptions that might otherwise colour an analysis of the Aztec's understanding of children and adults. Secondly (5.22), the Aztecs' perspective will be presented, and third (5.23) the implications of this understanding will be applied to Aztec child sacrifice and Aztec human sacrifice more broadly. Child sacrifice, when interpreted from a Western understanding of the nature of children and the goals of childhood, can appear as an awful tragedy and as something that children should have been saved and protected from, but from within Aztec ontology, sacrificing children—who were very similar to adults—was a worthwhile decision. It was a reflection of the fact that children were just as ritually active as everyone else and that sacrifice was a communal enterprise. Yet, through these sacrifices we can also see how, for the Aztecs, human sacrifices could be emotional sacrifices as well.

5.21 — "Child" and "Childhood" in the West and the World

The study of childhood in archaeology has largely arisen in the past twenty-five years (Baxter 2005:15). However, before this and into today the recent Western notions of "children" as people lacking in agency and importance and "childhood" as a time of leisure has resulted in children been overlooked in Mesoamerican scholarship and archaeology more broadly (Ardren 2006:4–5; Baxter 2005:2; Joyce 2006:298).

In the modern-day West, "children" are often seen as fundamentally good and innocent/naïve (possessing different natures than adults), as passive and lacking in agency, and as precious and emotionally valuable to their parents (Ardren 2006:6,9). "Childhood", or the state that all children are or should be experiencing, defined by Baxter (2005:1) as "a prolongued period of dependence during which children mature physically and acquire the cultural knowledge necessary to become accepted members of society", is seen as a time that is or should be free of major responsibilities, and involve some level of innocence and protection from the "adult" world of violence, sexuality, drugs, and suicide (Ardren 2006:4; Kehily 2009:4). Following these perspectives, the sacrifice of children would be more abhorrent than adult sacrifice, would be a failure of their parents to protect the children, and would potentially dehumanize the Aztec people.

These are, however, recent constructions even in the West. While "children" are commonly defined by age today, for instance, in the past they were defined by markers like inferiority, dependency, lack of married status, or lack of full-time work (Gittens 2008:37). "Childhood", as a period when parents were supposed to put an invested effort into their children, didn't exist until at least the 1500s, arising because of a Puritan belief in "innate sin": that even children could go to Hell and thus needed to be educated and converted (Gittens 2009:41–42). Ideas about the value, nature and purpose of children are even more recent. It wasn't until the 1800s that the value of children for their parents in the West changed from a largely economic one to one that was more sentimental (Gittens 2009:43), and that childhood became seen as a time of leisure (Joyce 2006:298). At the same time, children—who hitherto had been seen as largely like adults and possessing of the nature as them (Aries 1960 in Gittens 2009:38)—began to be romanticized as "good" and "innocent" (Murray 1998:xvii). This was in part due to Rousseau's influence, who described children as being in a state of pure goodness and innocence, qualities which also placed them closer to the Christian god (Kehily 2009:5).

Both the concepts of "child" and "childhood" are culturally specific constructions, however, the meaning of which varies substantially cross-culturally (Ardren 2006:3; Baxter 2005:1; Gittins 2009:37–38; Joyce 2006:283; Lally and Moore 2011:ii). A consideration of the agency of children is important (Joyce 2006:285), as in many cultures, children play active, central and important roles economically, socially, religiously, and politically (Baxter 2005:11). In some cases, "child" is not even a social category, or even a few social categories (Joyce 2006:283), and in some places no difference can be seen in how adults and children are treated (Lally and Moore 2011:iii). On the other hand, in some places not only are adults and children different, but infants and older children are even more divided, because infants are seen as liminal beings (Klaus and Shimada 2016:146; Lally and Moore 2011:ii). While this liminality of infants appears to be the case for the Aztecs, a difference between *children* and adults that makes the sacrifice of children more powerful (Klaus and Shimada 2016:146) is not well supported in the Aztec case.

All of these reflections of children and childhood come with notes of caution, however, when viewed through an archaeological or historical lens. Finding visible clusters of ages does not always mean that social groups were defined by age (Joyce 2006:288), and nor can any particular material culture be expected to be related to childhood exclusively (Joyce 2006:291).

Analyzing childhood in the past can also be complicated by the fact that it is almost always historically presented and constructed from the perspective of an adult (Gittins 2009:36; Joyce 2006:284), impacted by their idealization and perspective, and is also often interlinked with the learning and construction of gender (Baxter 2005:3).

5.22 — The Aztec Understanding

Overall, children were very similar to adults in Aztec culture. Children could be war captives or slaves (López Austin 1988:401) and worked alongside their parents from as young as four years old (Codex Mendoza in Joyce 2000:478). That nearly all sacrificial deposits of children also include adults (Table 2) suggests that they could be viewed and valued similarly to adults, and that children were sacrificed frequently reflects simultaneously that sacrificing children mattered and yet was not exceptional in comparison to the sacrifice of adults. Children were not shielded from violence and death, but were instead involved in crucially important sacrifices, state ritual and thus politics, and therefore had social and cosmic agency.

These are all ontological and cultural differences with clear implications for sacrifice. However, the Aztec understanding of children differed even further: "children" actually included three categories and not one, making "child" sacrifice a potentially harmful oversimplification. The existence and importance of age-grades within Aztec ontology, which appear to have been factors in the selection of sacrificees for the Tlaloc and Ehecatl rain-god sacrifices, are important for a study of child sacrifice because they fundamentally change what "child" sacrifice was and meant.

The Aztecs recognized three categories or stages of "child". Joyce (2000) laid the foundation for this subject, identifying the three "age-grades" of Aztec culture based largely on depictions from the Codex Mendoza, while also drawing from the Florentine Codex. She does, however, make a number of internally inconsistent claims[27] regarding when, exactly, these age-grades occurred. I suggest reconciling these contradictions by maintaining that adulthood started at age 13, but that Stage 1 ended at age 3 or 4, and Stages 2 and 3 could range between 3 and 6 years long, balancing each other out (Table 7). These fit with the ages of note collected by

[27] Joyce wrote that adulthood is achieved in the "early teens", that the Izcalli ritual (which occurred every four years) marked the transition from Stage 2-3 and that the last stage started by age 8 at the latest, and that each age-grade was about four years each. However, because children in a four-year age range would be partaking in the Izcalli ritual, the age-grades could not have all been four years.

Joyce—that girls experienced a clothing change at 3 and boys at 4, that ages 4–7 show children starting to learn their parents' work, that at 7–9 children are shown being physically disciplined for the first time following their Izcalli ritual, and that at 7 boys had a clothing change (Joyce 2000:477–479)—as well as the fact that Aztec infants were typically weaned around age 3 or 4 (Ardren 2006:8; López Austin 1988:298). The end of Stage 1 would then be marked by weaning, a clothing change, and beginning to work with the parents, while Stage 2 would end with the next Izcalli ritual: this transition to Stage 3 could happen as late as 10 (Child 2 in Table 7) or as early as 7 (Child 1 or 5).

Table 7. Ages of Different Children in Relation to Quadrennial Izcalli Rituals with Stage 2 Highlighted.

Children	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	*Izcalli*	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	*Izcalli*	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	*Izcalli*
Child 1	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Child 2		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Child 3			0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Child 3				0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Child 5					0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Notes: Here, age 4, rather than 4 or 3, is used as the start of Stage 2.

As proposed here, in an Izcalli year any child between the ages of 7 and 10 would have their Izcalli ceremony. In other years, Stage 2 children are all children between the ages of 4 and 7 (Y1), 5 and 8 (Y2), or 6 and 9 (Y3)

Stage 1 children are of particular note, because within Aztec ontology these infants may have been even more different from other children than the category of "child" was from "adult". In their first few years of life, Aztec infants were liminal beings. This can be seen in their destination at death: only Stage 1 children go to Chichihualcuauhco when they die, a tree that continues nursing them, and only those who go to Chichihualcuauhco are reincarnated and reborn (Clendinnen 1991:191; López Austin 1998: 314). The reason for this liminality is probably related to diet. Children who were still nursing ate of their mothers, who could be seen as being like their own earth (Clendinnen 1991:208), and did not eat of the gods they way everyone else did. They did not eat of the food/maize that was the gods, and as such, they did not yet have their own direct relationships with the gods and depended on their mothers instead (Clendinnen 1991:191). This meant that infants of this first stage were the only ones who were largely free of responsibilities in the manner of the Western concept of childhood. After this

period, children had their own relationships with the gods and their own personal need and responsibility to partake in rituals of sacrifice and autosacrifice.

There is also some mention ethnohistorically of Aztec infants being pure and closer to the gods (in Román 1999:14). While the idea that infants were more "pure" was at least partly a European or Rousseauian influence (the Florentine Codex, for one, states that the reason children were pure is because of their lack of sexual desire [in López Austin 1988:289], despite that sexual desire wasn't viewed negatively by the Aztecs [Clendinnen 1991:167]), the idea that they were closer to the gods might be true. The gods died and were reborn through the actions and ceremonies of humans, and as such were the only entities that shared in the rebirth that infants experienced when they died, went to Chichihualcuauhco, and were reborn. For an infant as for a god, death meant being born anew in a stronger, healthier form. In a way, perhaps this made infants more material than older humans: while an older child or adults would shed zer body, *tonalli* and *ihiyotl* at death, helping out the physical *teteo* as an aphysical *teyolia*, an infant could not truly die just as a god could not cease to exist. Both would undoubtedly be born again—at least, until the infant grew and changed out of zer "infant" status, and began zer own relationship with the gods as an outsider, as part of the human side in a mutually supportive relationship.

After the initial nursing stage, an Aztec childhood was largely an integration into adulthood. From a young age, children were dedicated to either the *calmecac* or the *telpochcalli*, which Joyce calls "adult institutions" (2000:477), and from as young as 3 years old (Stage 2), they were apprenticed to their parents, they partook in sacrificial rituals, and they ate of maize and had their own consequent relationships with the gods. They were in training, but their natures and roles seem far more similar to those of adults than they are different, and they do not appear to have been shielded from "adult" realities. That the Aztecs included their children in important rituals like the annual rain-god sacrifices, rituals that were actually crucial to preventing starvation, also shows that at the very least the Aztecs valued their children, and either trusted them to do their part or respected them as equals and members of the same community to which they belonged.

Archaeologically, the existence and real difference between these age grades means that calling the sacrifices of children (as defined by age) "child sacrifices" is misleading because they were often of different age-based groups, and weakens the premise for even asking the question of "Why did they sacrifice children?". A better question might be: "Why were a disproportionate

number (52.4%) of the sacrifices of subadults (especially children under 12, more especially children under 7) made to the rain gods in particular?". To this, no convincing non-Western explanation has yet been made, though one possibility is that rain caused new growth and new life which young children might represent.

Even apart from the age-grades, however, the association between children and rain-god sacrifices, which was initiated by the ethnohistoric sources, is somewhat misleading. The Ehecatl sacrifice in Tlatelolco contained four out of five age-related categories recognized by the Aztecs: Stage 1, 2, and 3 children, and adults (ranging from teenagers to 35 years) (Cruz et al 2008:521; Román and Rodriguez 1997:237). The inclusion of children in this sacrifice was entirely unremarkable; what was, was the notable lack of seniors (it is possible that seniors, whose *tonalli* and *teyolia* were both seen to be strengthened by age and perhaps also their *ihiyotl*, could have been too powerful or too dangerous to sacrifice). There are two cases archaeologically where a group of children without adults are found—in the Tlaloc sacrifice at the Templo Mayor and the neck vertebra from the ball court—but only one deposit containing children has only one age-grade of children recognized—the Tlaloc sacrifice at the Templo Mayor. This sacrifice appears to only have Stage 2 children (and because they are ages 3–7, this would mean the sacrifice was from the year after an Izcalli ceremony [Table 7]). One explanation for the selection of Stage 2 children might be that Stage 2 children—who had just begun to eat hard food, have a direct relationship with the gods, and work with their parents—were seen as inhabiting a period of particular social change, a change that could call to the change needed in weather. Another explanation is that Stage 1 children didn't yet have their own relationship with Tlaloc or the rain and so were not effective sacrifices (perhaps their rebirth could conflict with that of the god), and of the remaining categories, Stage 2 were the youngest, and youth and growth were related. Why all types of children, even infants, were sacrificed alongside adults in the Ehecatl sacrifice, by contrast, may be because everyone had some relationship with the wind, because everyone had an *ihiyotl*, which was the breath and wind of a body.

5.23 — The Experience of Child Sacrifice

These differences between the Aztec and Western perspectives of children have substantial impacts on the meaning and experience of child sacrifice. While from a Western perspective, child sacrifice might be seen as a parental and cultural failure, as a tragedy, and as

something children should have been saved or protected from, from the Aztecs' understanding, "children" were rarely treated differently in sacrifice than adults, and sacrifice itself was a necessary ritual to keep everyone else alive. Sacrificing people was, however, still emotionally difficult for the Aztecs.

Two historical accounts suggest that sacrificing children to the rain gods each year was very difficult for the Aztec people, and that sadness was the predominant emotion expressed. The first is a mention by Sahagún, who describes the parents in the rain-god sacrifices as "shedding many tears and with great sorrow in their hearts" (1981:0:57), and says more generally that "there was much compassion. They made one weep" (1981:0:44). A second anecdote suggests the same atmosphere. In the 1500s when an extensive effort was made to convert the Nahua peoples to Christianity, the Nahuas began associating saints and other non-divine figures with the lesser gods of their old pantheon, and related Tlaloc to Abraham, because of the Biblical story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham (Diaz Balsera 2005:29,212). The only substantial differences between the rain-god rituals and Isaac's near-sacrifice were whether the sacrifice was an exception and that Isaac's sacrifice was substituted for an animal at the last minute; the Nahuas related to this story because they too had been called upon by their gods to sacrifice their own beloved children, and it was incredibly difficult and heartbreaking for them (Diaz Balsera 2005:87–96). That the Nahuas saw this connection between the story of Abraham and Isaac and Tlaloc shows us something of their experience in sacrificing their children, and through them, any of their people: that it was difficult and sad, and yet was so important that they did it anyway. These accounts help illustrate the costs that the Aztecs paid in order to live.

That sadness appears to have been the dominant emotion in these rituals conveniently aligns with Western understandings of grief and loss, but sadness or its expression would not be necessary to show that these sacrifices were difficult losses. Other emotions like anger (Renato Rosaldo 2014:117) or a cultivated apathy through intentional forgetting and distraction (Hemer 2010) can also be seen as "natural" or "healthy" reactions to loss in other cultures. The feeling inspired by loss is culturally shaped, and even more so is the expression of that feeling. In the rain god-sacrifices, the tears that were supposedly wept in profusion may very well have been encouraged, just as in other cultures, tears at an occasion of death might be discouraged (e.g. Nations et al 2015:621). Sahagún writes that it was seen as a good sign if the children being sacrificed to the rain gods cried (Sahagún 1981:2:44), something which, very plausibly, the

children could have tried to do in order to increase the chances of the rains coming. While superficially assessing this from a Western perspective the tears might be seen as a lack of care for the plight of the children, instead those tears might be a sign of teamwork and action on the part of everyone involved. If Sahagún was correct that the tears of the children were instrumental in bringing the rains, then it could also very well be that it wasn't cruelty or violence or betrayal that brought the rains, but love: tears of love and loss in a difficult but necessary act in a never-ending exchange with the gods of life for life and food for food.

Not allowing for these other ontological truths can and has led to dehumanization when it comes to child sacrifice. In her historical review of the construction of childhood, Gittins (2009), makes the following summary: "Psychohistorians see parent-child relations as gradually improving…from the time when children were valued hardly at all and even sacrificed (literally), to modern…loving relationships" (42). Rather than seeing sacrifice as an expression of extreme value and power, she reduces it to an act of careless and meaningless violence. The suggestion that sacrifice is "even" worse than not valuing children at all is the complete opposite of the truth, and even contradicts the meaning of the Western term "sacrifice" that she uses; ("sacrifice" in English derives from the Latin "sacer" (sacred) and "facere" (to do/make), and thus literally means to make sacred or perform a sacred act[28]).

Such ideas come from the perspective of Western ontology and the modern Western constructs of "child" and "childhood", including that sacrifice is caused by parents (because children have no agency), that children need to be protected, and that sacrifice does not actually accomplish anything metaphysical. Through this ontological lens, child sacrifice can be seen as the failure of Aztec parents. This debate was illustrated in the conflict between the researchers Scheper-Hughes (1989) and Nations et al. (2015) in South America. While Scheper Hughes suggested that the mothers of a poor Brazilian community did not grieve the loss of young children and practiced passive infanticide with them because they waited a few years until it was "safe" to love them and become attached (1989:11), Nations et al (2015) critiqued this argument as "victim-blaming" the mothers for the results of their poverty. Arguing from an ethnocentric Western standpoint, Nations et al were convinced that the allegation of passive infanticide was indeed an allegation (a charge of a crime), one that would reflect "some of our worst fears…about human nature" (2015:634) were it true, and one that *constituted* blame. However,

[28] http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=sacrifice

just as sadness and its expression are not necessary for love and loss, in certain ontological and cultural realities, sacrifice or passive infanticide can be a positive solution to a difficult situation.

While in some ways the Aztecs' grief toward the deaths of their children coincided with a Western one, their attitudes around children and childhood—just like their understandings of the world, nature and the impact of sacrifice—lay firmly outside of current Western understandings, which substantially impacts an understanding of child sacrifice. After the infancy stage Aztec children were much like adults, and the choice to sacrifice children seems to have often been inconsequential—in as much as children were just three more demographic groups—rather than a sign that sacrificing children was exceptional. Although children were sacrificed less often than adults just as women were sacrificed less often then men, this seems more likely to have stemmed from adult males comprising the majority of war captives rather than because children were seen as markedly different sacrificees. They do appear to have been subtly different, or at least as different as any one age-grade was to another, because of the couple child-only sacrifices, though this doesn't mean that they were more or less powerful, but only that they were associated with different qualities and different gods or domains of power. Aztec children were powerful and valued and played significant roles in Aztec religion in the same way that Aztec adults did. Even following the cessation of human and child sacrifice after the fall of the Aztec Empire, Nahua people continued to respect and consult the dead children of the rain gods in Tlalocan (López Austin 1988:339), because these children still held religious and cosmic power.

The difficulty and grief experienced in the practice of child sacrifice demonstrates not only the Aztecs' love and respect for their children, but their resilience in dealing with incredible loss, and their ability to sacrifice something they loved—their children—for their larger, even more important cause. They sacrificed their children, or their children sacrificed themselves, because they, like everyone else, had a crucial role to play in maintaining balance: sacrificing life for life and power for power. Through the rupturing of their life-complexes that also allowed the death of the gods, the death of children and adults gave power to the gods in the act of sacrificial death and rebirth. After death, they/their *teyolia* helped lend strength to the gods that had once fed them in life, completing a cycle.

The precarious balance of the Aztec world, and the fragility of both life and the gods, meant that sacrifice was not guaranteed to work. That the Aztecs still practiced it, still sacrificed their children and the people they loved, meant that their cause was incredibly important to them.

It meant that sacrifice was an act of fierce hope and love: hope that life would continue, and love for the life that they believed was worth living despite the cost. Life—their culture, their families, their world—was more important than any one person, and though the world would someday end, in the meantime the Aztecs were committed to fighting for it.

CHAPTER 6 — Conclusion

Human sacrifice is a practice with many layers of meaning and wide-ranging impacts. While sacrifice, like any ritual that is so central to the ontology and cosmology of a people, has political and economic impacts, it is also important to consider how it was viewed from within the ontology of the people who practiced it, and how it was experienced by them. This thesis has focussed on the Aztecs calendrical sacrifices of *teixiptlahuan* because these were the most cosmically significant sacrifices, those that were ordinary and necessary on a monthly basis. For those in the capital, and those in the empire who had faith in the power of the state priests, such sacrifices were an ongoing offering of death to life itself, and the hope that it might continue.

Better understanding elements of Aztec ontology have elucidated some of the meaning and experience of human sacrifice. The existence of *teixiptlahuan* for instance, by collapsing "human" and "god", also collapses any certainty that everything is being handled by omnipotent deities or that life will continue to exist; by demonstrating that there is a point of contact in the concepts of human and god and animate object and god, *teixiptlahuan* also demonstrate that the fragility of Aztec life and the constant likelihood of death, found in the very selves of humans and their dependence on entities outside of themselves like the corn they needed to eat, reflects the shared vulnerability of humans, life, and gods together. This changes the implications of the sacrificed animate objects found archaeologically, and transforms sacrifice generally from an act that was made *to* the gods, to an act that was *of* and needed by the gods

Exploring the nature of *teteo* or gods has revealed important differences and similarities between them and humans. While gods did not have the *tonalli* as heat and the *ihiyotl* as breath that the human body did, the parallel sun and the wind were gods, and everything of power or significance in the "natural" world or earthly plane was a god, from the stars and sun, to the rain and mountains, to the earth and corn. While humans depended on many gods or natural powers for their lives, they were also the only means by which the gods might be re-strengthened and

reborn through *teixiptlahuan* in an interdependent relationship. While the human self was aphysical, the gods always existed, at least in part, on the physical plane. That they were then helped by *teyolia*, the aphysical selves of dead humans, completes the cycle of power and giving.

Exploring the human life complex also changes the meaning of many archaeological findings related to sacrifice. Skulls displayed on *tzompantli* were likely infused with passive *tonalli*, and yet the fact that they were shaved and bled first meant that the gods received as much of the power of the *tonalli* as could be given. The *ihiyotl* that remained embodied after death and could have made corpses dangerous could help to explain the lack of bodies found archaeologically, as well as the lack of practiced cannibalism. Because the self or *teyolia* was not embodied, the body could be cut and divided after death, to be put to its best uses, including the skin to help construct *teixiptlahuan* and the heads to offer power and protection to temples.

An exploration of child sacrifice helps to tease apart some of the complexity in *who* was chosen for each sacrifice and why. Sometimes age-grades mattered, but more often, whether or not someone was a child seems not to have mattered ritually. Men and women, infants and children and adults were all sacrificed, because all of them had a stake in life, and all but infants had a direct relationship to all of the gods through their dependency on the food of the natural and godly world. That these sacrifices could be emotionally difficult emphasizes that they were an offering that gambled for something greater: the continuation of life itself. Despite what they saw as the constant suffering of life, the Aztecs chose to fight for life, and to choose the best solution to a bad situation. They chose hope, and in doing so, expressed their—ordinary, human—resilience.

Such findings have necessitated the study of Aztec ontology as valid, and the Aztec world as one with different metaphysical truths. If the Aztec gods did not exist and sacrifice did nothing, then there would be no meaning to the grief of the Aztecs. If *teixiptlahuan* were mere god-impersonators, there would be no power to the sacrifices, no persistence and desperate hope, no daring action to change the very balance of their world in order to save everything. If the rains would come to end a drought no matter what the Aztecs did, and if children are precious beings to be protected by their parents and shielded from violence, then child sacrifice was, at worst, the greatest failure of the Aztec people.

But by allowing for the possibility, within the context of the Aztec world, for nature to be infused with the supernatural, for natural cycles of rain and sun and harvest to be critically

dependant on human action, and for the possibility that through death, one could give life, sacrifice instead becomes something that is at the very core of the identity of the people of the Aztec capital, and at the heart of how they experienced life itself on a daily basis. Sacrifice, from within Aztec ontology, was ultimately an act of balance: of trying to create balance in the natural world, to balance death with life, males for females, dry for wet, and the destruction of a human life with the birth of a god. It worked within and recreated the complexity of what was the Aztecs relationship with the gods—the gods they ate, the gods they worshipped, and the gods they strengthened when they died—which lay at the heart of the experience and meaning of Aztec sacrifice.

The implications of such an ontological study are substantial, both for the Aztecs and for racism and other forms of discrimination today. Because of its place in history, its role in justifying the Spanish invasion and its use as a weapon for the subjugation of indigenous peoples, Aztec human sacrifice is not a topic that can be discussed without either countering or passively agreeing with a history of racism and colonialism. Rejecting both the Romanticization and the barbarization of the Aztecs is important in trying to understand them, and in trying to remember that they were, "despite" and because of sacrifice, human.

Dodds Pennock (2012:287) writes that "Violence can be understood only within its own cultural context", and here, allowing that ontological context to speak before forming judgements on Aztec practices has allowed for a better understanding of the Aztec people and what lay behind their violence. However, "violence" too, is a culturally constructed notion. In one Aztec song, despite the seemingly obvious violence of Aztec culture, the singer[29] expressed a desire to die without violence: "[If I must die] thus let it be, but let it be without violence" (León-Portilla 1992:69). This desire for peace and to simply live well is repeated in other songs: "Life passes once," one said; "In but a day we're gone, in but a night we're shorn on earth. And as for having come to know each other, this we merely borrow here on earth. May we live in gentleness, in peace! (Bierhorst 1995:297–301).

And perhaps the irony of such a sentiment coming from people of a culture with practices that have historically been seen as violent, unfeeling and barbaric can provide an important take-home message. Without respecting Aztec ontology and without allowing for a world that had different rules and for gods that required humans to strengthen them, such quotations cannot

[29] Nahua songs voiced opinions of the collective, not individuals (Clendinnen 1991:218).

make sense, because they conflict with superficial stereotypes that go back five hundred years. But challenging such stereotypes, and such a lineage of racism, colonialism, and discrimination in the West toward all those lacking privilege is part of the job of anthropology: to see through the Othering haze of ignorance and hate, and to strive for that gentleness and peace that the Nahua singer called for through study, respect, and better understanding.

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