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“flowery war” in Aztec history

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A notion that has captured the imagination of many modern writers on Aztec Mexico is that the Aztec believed so fervently in the need to nourish their gods with the blood of human sacrifices that they developed an institution called “flowery war” (*xochiyaoyotl*) for the express purpose of supplying this need. Two states agreed to fight battles, it is held, not to win, but simply to obtain in proper military fashion the necessary sacrificial victims. This item appears in many standard works (for example, Vaillant 1941: 99–100, 222; Caso 1958: 14; Krickeberg 1961: 155; Soustelle 1962: 100–101; Weaver 1972: 243; Davies 1974: 96–97; Coe 1977: 134) and seems to have become a generally accepted element in the standard ethnographic vignette of the Aztec. Recently, Harner (1977) has used it to support his theory of an Aztec “cannibal empire,” and it seems to have been accepted as at least an emic truth by Price (1978) in her critique of Harner.

The early sources on the Aztec give little support to this notion. There were indeed “flowery wars” in ancient Mexico. But were they waged primarily to obtain sacrificial victims? Were such victims normally even obtained through them? These questions have implications beyond the immediate concern with Aztec warfare and sacrifice. Are wars in state-level societies ever initiated for purely religious or ritual reasons? To be sure, the prominence of an official cult in many preindustrial states gives to most wars, whatever their motives or objectives, a religious aspect; and even in modern states, religion often serves to legitimize a protest begun for other reasons. For example, one can think of the nineteenth-century Moslem *jihads* of western Africa, the recent civil strife in Northern Ireland, and of course, the Medieval European Crusades (see also the cases discussed in various papers in Thrupp 1962). In none of these instances is it difficult to see beneath the religious cloak to the underlying material causes and issues. If Aztec states really fought wars solely to satisfy the ritual requirements of their religious beliefs, it would be a very unusual case indeed, and it is not surprising that both Harner and Price suspected there was something more to it. In this paper, I will examine the data on wars called “flowery” in the ethnohistorical sources. Such data are not abundant, but they do suggest that sacrificial victims were at best an incidental and occasional by-product of flowery wars, and that the primary function of these wars was a much more practical one.

One of the sources that tells us the most about flowery war is Chimalpahin Quauhtlehuanitzin, a descendant of the ruling family of Amecameca, whose historical relations, written in the early seventeenth century, were based on earlier pictorial sources and oral traditions (Romero Galván 1977). It is from Chimalpahin that we get the most explicit state-

The notion that the Aztec fought “flowery wars” primarily to provide captives needed for human sacrifice is called into question. The data on wars called “flowery” in the ethnohistorical sources indicate that they were simply wars not aimed at conquest, and that the most common motive for waging them was to provide military training and practice.

ment of the difference between a flowery war (*xochiyaoyotl*) and a serious, mortal war (*cocoltic yaoyotl*, literally “angry war”). In 1376, he tells us, a flowery war was initiated between the Mexica of Tenochtitlan and the Chalca of Chalco Atenco, and while it lasted, “the noble Mexica who captured Chalca let them go, and the noble Chalca who captured Mexica let them go, and only some of the commoners got killed” (Chimalpahin 1965: 82–83, 157, 182; for Nahuatl text see Chimalpahin 1963: 78). However, after some years of this (either eight, twelve, or forty years), the war “turned at last into one based on anger, it was angry war, thus the flowery war was destroyed,” and the difference was that now the nobles captured by each side were not released and returned, but sacrificed (Chimalpahin 1963: 87; 1965: 89, 189). This war is also mentioned in the *Anales de Cuauhtitlan*, which states, “in this year [1 Flint, 1376] the Mexica and Chalca began to make war. Not yet did it become intense, not yet did people kill each other. It was like a game, and was called flowery war” (1974, par. 591–592). The flowery war “broke up,” according to this source (par. 604–605), when a real war began between the “Mexica-Tepaneca” and the Chalca in 1385 (the Mexica were at this time subjects of the Tepanec). Because of disagreements in the sources about the duration of this series of wars (Chimalpahin himself is inconsistent), we cannot be sure what caused it to become serious, but it was probably the Tepanec division to conquer Chalco. The important point to note, however, is that sacrificial victims are mentioned as a product only of the nonflowery war and not of the flowery one.

Chimalpahin also calls “flowery” an earlier war, which occurred in 1324, again in Chalco. Apparently the Tlacoachcalca (one of the groups that made up the Chalca state) and other Chalca were participating in a temple ceremony, one element of which was supposed to be a mock war. The fight got out of hand, turned violent, and some participants were killed. The priest Quetzalcanauhtli, guardian of the god Tezcatlipoca, tried to stop it, but he was unsuccessful and the Tlacoachcalca suffered continuing abuse. The Chalca threw burning brands at the Tlacoachcalca children and put chili peppers in their drinking water. After eight years of such harassment, the priest Quetzalcanauhtli left in disgust for Yecapixtla, taking his god with him (Chimalpahin 1965: 152–153, 177). No human sacrifice is mentioned.

Another flowery war, fought in 1381 between the Tepanec and the Chalca, is mentioned briefly by Chimalpahin (1965: 183), but he gives no details. What the two that are more fully described had in common was that they were not wars for conquest and subjugation. They were rough, and some people did get killed, but military leaders did not try to kill each other.

Most modern writers who have dealt with flowery war have used as their example the wars between the Triple Alliance (Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tacuba) and the Transmontane states (Huejotzingo, Tlaxcala, Atlixco, Tliluhquitepec, and Cholula, across the mountains in the Valley of Puebla). These began during the reign of Moteuczoma I (1440–1469) and were still going on when the Spanish arrived in 1519. Because it is hard to believe that the combined forces of the Triple Alliance, which had conquered and subjugated most of what is now southern Mexico, could not have defeated this small and disunited group of nearby states, one naturally suspects that they were not really trying. These wars must, therefore, have been flowery wars and are in fact called such by one Mexica chronicler (Alvarado Tezozomoc 1975).

Andrés de Tapia, one of Cortés’s captains, asked Moteuczoma II, the Mexica king, why he didn’t finish off the Tlaxcalans once and for all. He replied, “well could we do it, but then there would be no place where our youth could train themselves, except far away, and also, we desire that there should always be people to sacrifice to our gods” (Tapia 1866: 572).¹ The *Crónica X* histories (Alvarado Tezozomoc 1975; Duran 1967; and Tovar 1975), known for their pro-Mexica bias, also present this view. The situation appears differently,

however, in studies done from a Tlaxcalan perspective (Gibson 1952: 15; Davies 1968, Chap. 2); indeed, Muñoz Camargo, the sixteenth-century Tlaxcalan historian, was aware of the view expressed by Moteuczoma but explicitly denied it. He points out that the Triple Alliance had them besieged, cut off from trade in luxuries and even in salt, and appeared to be trying its best to crush them (Muñoz Camargo 1892, chap. 13, 15).

Some modern authors trace the Transmontane wars to the great drought and famine of 1454–1456, but such an origin seems unlikely. The idea comes from an account by Alva Ixtlilxóchitl (1952, vol. 2: 207), who wrote that after all material means to alleviate the suffering caused by the drought had been exhausted, it was decided as a last resort to appeal to the gods and offer sacrifices. Accordingly, the rulers of the Triple Alliance and those of the Transmontane states, which were also affected, got together and decided to stage a series of battles in order to procure sacrificial victims. Alva Ixtlilxóchitl is the only source to record this, and he did not call it a flowery war, nor did he indicate that it continued after the drought ended. It may not even have happened; according to Alvarado Tezozomoc (1975, chap. 80) the only sacrifices offered to appease the gods on this occasion were albinos, hydrocephalics, hunchbacks, and dwarfs, and they were not captured in war.

A different origin for the Transmontane wars is recorded in the *Crónica X* histories, and it is the one preferred by most modern authors. According to these accounts, Moteuczoma I wanted to dedicate the new temple of Huitzilopochtli with the sacrifice of prisoners recently taken in Oaxaca, but the temple was still a long way from completion, and his advisor Tlacaelel advised him not to wait, but to order them sacrificed right away. But if that were done, Moteuczoma asked, how could it be certain there would be another war, and new prisoners, when the time for the dedication arrived? Tlacaelel offered a solution whereby the gods would always be served with human blood, and there would always be opportunity for the sons of the lords and the lovers of war to exercise their skills and prove their valor. They would make the Transmontane states into a great “military fair,” and just as one goes to market periodically to buy precious jewels, one would go there periodically to buy honor and glory with blood and lives, and the king would give precious jewels to those who earned them in battle. Thus, the sons of the nobles would not become soft, and military skill would not be lost (Durán 1967, vol. 2, chap. 28–29; Alvarado Tezozomoc 1975, chap. 39; Tovar 1975: 132; see also Pomar 1941: 41–42). There is no mention of flowery war in connection with this proposal, although, as already noted, Alvarado Tezozomoc does occasionally use the term in his accounts of these wars (Alvarado Tezozomoc 1975: chap. 86, 94).

The *Crónica X* histories were written after the Spanish conquest, and it may be that they, as well as Moteuczoma II in his reply to Tapia, were simply trying to rationalize an embarrassing military failure, which is what Price (1978: 110) also suggested. But let us suppose they were telling the truth. What Moteuczoma said, and what the *Crónica X* accounts also say, is that these wars were fought for two reasons: to provide military training and exercises to practice military skills, and to obtain sacrificial victims. What is curious is that so many modern authors have picked up on the part about the human sacrifice and have ignored the part about the military training. Yet the military training motive fits more easily into what we know of the pattern of Aztec society and history than the human sacrifice motive does.

Sahagún has described in some detail the training given to the sons of both nobles and commoners in the youths’ houses, the *calmecac* and the *telpochcalli*. Great emphasis was placed on military training, and in both kinds of youths’ houses, this training included, for mature youths, participation in an actual war. For nobles such advanced training was probably obligatory, and for commoners it was at least strongly encouraged. Those who were courageous and skillful enough to take captives received special recognition. From among

them, commoners as well as nobles, were chosen those who would occupy high positions of various kinds, such as judges (*teuctlatoque*), constables (*achcacauhtin*), stewards (*calpixque*), and a variety of other supervisory or leadership posts (Sahagún 1950–1969, bk. 3, appendix chap. 5; bk. 8, chap. 17, 20, 21; see also Durán 1967, vol. 1, chap. 5; Carrasco 1971: 356–358).

An empire built up by conquest and supported by the involuntary tribute rendered by subjugated peoples obviously had to keep its military apparatus well lubricated because local rebellions frequently had to be put down. Military training had to be especially effective, and none is so effective as actual combat. What the *Crónica X* histories seem to be telling us is that during the reign of Moteuczoma I, the Mexica introduced actual combat into their military training by attacking the Transmontane states when no other war was in progress. Before this, back when they were still Tepanec subjects, the Mexica may have gotten practice in the flowery wars with Chalco, but it was strictly exercise, and they let their captives go.

As for human sacrifice, every empire has developed some high moral principle to justify its actions and for which its people would be more willing to risk their lives than they would be just to make their rulers rich and powerful. Feeding the gods to maintain the universe serves quite well, as long as the necessary victims are available, and it is not surprising that Moteuczoma should have mentioned it in his reply to Tapia. The Spanish, after all, sometimes claimed that their purpose in conquering Mexico was to spread Christianity. We need not go into the relationship between ideology and empire, which in this case is quite transparent; besides, the matter has been dealt with just recently by Price (1978). Most wars did yield prisoners, and they were indeed sacrificed, which made for an impressive display of military power. It also afforded an occasion for publicly recognizing individual captors, which thereby encouraged the acquisition of military skill (Motolinía 1971: 349–351; Sahagún 1950–1969, bk. 8, chap. 17, par. 1). That is, the function of human sacrifice can be seen as more political than religious. But it is not the purpose of this paper to offer an explanation for Aztec human sacrifice. The point is that not even the Aztec themselves, as far as we know, claimed that they went to war, flowery or otherwise, simply to capture prisoners to sacrifice to their gods.

What, then, was a flowery war? I can only base conclusions on the few examples the sources provide, which are the three series of wars discussed above. Comparing these with the far more numerous examples of wars not called “flowery,” I can say that it was war fought not for conquest, but for “sport.” To be sure, in an unequal contest, what was “sport” for the stronger might not have been “sport” for the weaker. The Chalca had sport with the Tlacoachcalca, and the Mexica had sport with the Tlaxcalans and their neighbors, but it may not have been viewed as sport by their opponents. At least in the latter instance, it was only the Mexica who called it flowery war; the Tlaxcalans did not. On the other hand, the late fourteenth-century engagements between the Chalca and the Mexica seem to have been flowery wars by mutual agreement; they were sport for both sides, at least as far as the leaders were concerned.

Why did the Aztec fight wars for sport? Except for the one between the Chalca and the Tlacoachcalca, which sounds from Chimalpahin’s description like an internecine brawl (but “flowery” because it did not involve conquest), training would seem to be the most plausible reason, and the one most in accord with all the data. The sources actually tell us this only about the wars between the Triple Alliance and the Transmontane states, but it makes sense also in regard to the earlier wars between the Mexica and Chalca. The combatants did not seek to conquer each other, and they apparently did not take sacrificial victims,² but they would have had reason to keep in training militarily because wars of conquest were of fairly frequent occurrence. Only one of the series of flowery wars on record seems

to have produced any sacrificial victims, and even it produced relatively few. Alvarado Tezozomoc (1975), who goes into some detail on the number of captives taken in all Mexica wars and the circumstances of their sacrifice, indicates that the really large numbers of prisoners sacrificed on special occasions amidst lavish pageantry were taken in real wars, not flowery ones.

Both Harner and Price had some difficulty fitting flowery war as it has been customarily represented into their materialist perspectives, but both accepted that it was, at least on an emic level, an institution for obtaining sacrificial victims. Both were therefore concerned to find the etic explanation that was presumably hidden behind these emics. To Harner it was a quest for human meat, while to Price it was to maintain morale in a military stalemate. In fact, however, they were not dealing with the correct emics; the Aztec may have been a bit more materialist than we tend to give them credit for.

In summary, the data on flowery wars are sparse, but they certainly do not justify making the generalization that such wars were waged for the purpose of obtaining sacrificial victims. I conclude that a flowery war was any war that was not aimed at conquest, and that the most common function of such wars was to provide practical military training and exercise. Moreover, to judge from the one case in which motives are recorded, this function was apparently well understood by the Aztec leaders themselves.

notes

¹ Tapia's account is the primary source for this statement, but it was repeated by other early writers (for example, Pomar 1941: 43). By 1590, however, Acosta (1962: 250) had embellished it with the assertion that the second of these reasons, the acquisition of sacrificial victims, was the principal one. Tapia's quotation of Moteuczoma does not bear this out.

² We cannot, of course, exclude the possibility that some of the commoners who were killed were actually sacrificed, but this is nowhere stated. To infer that they were would be valid only if there were other evidence that such was the general pattern.

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