CHAPTER 3

A Meaty Incarnation: Making Sense of Divine Flesh for Aztec Christians

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Unless you eat the flesh-meat of the Son of the Virgin, and drink His blood, you shall not have life in you.

John 6:53 [In the Nahuatl translation by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, c. 1540]

In the Romance languages that are closest to Latin, there is no distinction between the word ‘flesh’ and the word ‘meat’; they are one and the same. In Italian, Spanish and Portuguese, carne translates the Latin word carnis. The Aztecs of central Mexico—who called themselves Mexica, and who spoke a language known as Nahuatl—would certainly have understood and appreciated this fact because long before encountering any European Christian, they already had a word for the concept of divine flesh. They called it teonanácatl, literally ‘flesh-meat of gods’, and correspondingly, teotlaqualli, ‘food of gods’.1

The Mexica were an extremely religious people, totally immersed in a sacred cosmos, even though there was an apparent lack of uniformity in their liturgy and standardization of their mythology. There is no evidence among them of a formal credo of required beliefs or a circumscribed pantheon of gods—notions that would be alien to a Mesoamerican way of thinking, and no doubt a constant frustration to the European interpreters who expected similarities to the Greco-Roman and Germanic deities, not to mention to the God of the Hebrews. The Mexica’s animistic religion included a bewildering number of male and female deities, some of whom bore superficial affinities to Christ, the saints, and the Christian God.2 These polymorphous deities were creators and

1 López Austin A., The Human Body and Ideology: Concepts of the Ancient Nahuas 1:162, the name most commonly applied to the human body considered as a whole is tonacayo, ‘the whole of our flesh’. The same term is applied to the fruits of the earth, especially to the most important one, maize, as we shall see. Every living thing is tonacayotl, ‘spiritual flesh-hood’ on earth.


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destroyers, bearers of both good and ill; unlike their European counterparts, they were not understood as discrete persons or individuals. They not only personified the earth, wind, water, lightning, and other natural forces like fertility, regeneration, death, and war, but those forces were the gods themselves. Indeed, for the Mexica, who lacked a notion of the profane, the cosmos was alive and imbued with divine energies. Devotees encountered those energies in the use of psychotropic drugs, in the intoxication of pulque beer, in ecstatic dancing, but above all in ritual performance, which acted to interpret the place of individuals and peoples in the larger scheme of reality. This transmutable vitality could be found in all of matter, living and active, constantly feeding other living matter in the cosmos and needing to be fed.3

**Incarnation and Comestability**

The Aztecs understood that while they ate the flora and fauna of the earth, they in turn were consumed as ‘first fruits’ by the same landscape and its deities who ate them. Terrain, plant life, and human beings were locked in an eating relationship, a drinking-feeding frenzy. The landscape, with its sacred energies, was an edible reality for human beings, but humans were also the foodstuff of the sacred landscape.4 Reciprocity was the operative principle as ‘debt payment’ for vitality, and the necessarily violent consequence was sacrifice. Debt payment (*neixtlahualiztli*) was the most often used metaphor for sacrificial offering.5 For example, in the pre-Conquest period it was possible to have a deputy-victim sacrificed in one’s stead. A person who survived a serious illness sacrificed a slave or even his own child to repay the debt. In this way, the debtor compensated for the death that he avoided. And when, for example, a slave personifying the patroness of weavers was killed, all the women of the weaving corporation somehow died through the victim, provided that they had contributed to her purchase and had assimilated themselves to her

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4 Arnold, *Eating Landscape*, passim; Carrasco, “Cosmic Jaws”, 435: '[H]umans and gods, in order to survive for a little while longer, were constantly on the hunt for vital forces embedded in the bodies of gods, humans, and plants'.

5 López Austin, *Human Body*, 2:292; *neixtlahualiztli*: ‘a sacrifice in payment for goods received or hoped for from the gods’. Two other words for sacrifice are *uemmana* and *tlamana*, both of which etymologically have to do with the culinary action of kneading and rolling out corn dough for roasting.