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Introduction

Symbolizing Tezcatlipoca

NICHOLAS J. SAUNDERS AND ELIZABETH BAQUEDANO

A presence of absence defines the ambivalent nature of Tezcatlipoca, the supreme deity of the Late Postclassic Aztec pantheon. In the dark ephemeral reflection of his obsidian mirror and the transient sound of his ceramic flower pipes lies the sensuous nature of a god who mediates materiality and invisibility with omniscience and omnipresence. These qualities are evident not only for the Aztecs but also for scholars today. As Michael Smith (this volume) points out, only recently have we begun to move beyond the written words and painted images of the codices to assess a different kind of Tezcatlipoca's material traces—the objects in which the numinous becomes tangible.

In one sense, Tezcatlipoca was a reification of age-old Mesoamerican patterns of symbolic thought, which abstracted supernatural connotations from the natural world. Specifically, Tezcatlipoca emerged as a supernatural embodiment of cultural attributes inspired by, and bestowed upon, aspects of regional geography/geology and local fauna by the Late Postclassic, pre-Aztec cultures of the Valley of Mexico that were shaped by analogical symbolic reasoning and political exigencies (see Umberger, this volume). Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the deity's relationship with obsidian (*itzatl*) and the jaguar (*ocelotl*)—two natural kinds imbued with ideational significance across Mesoamerica, recombined in metaphysics, and given physical expression in a distinctive kind of material culture: obsidian mirrors (Smith, this volume).

These reflective devices were powerfully ambiguous, not least because they shone with a “dark light.” They partook of what has been called a pan-Amerindian

“aesthetic of brilliance,” which accorded sacredness and power to a multimedia assemblage of shiny objects—the material metaphors of access to and control of the glowing spirit realm from whence status and political power flowed (Saunders 1998). Baquedano’s (this volume) analysis of Tezcatlipoca’s golden ornamentation, where brilliance and the sounds of bells (symbolic of warfare) reinforce this conceptual association, is epitomized by Durán’s description.

Tezcatlipoca was thus a product of both a conceptual landscape that drew upon the physical environment (and what was made of it metaphorically) and a cultural landscape composed of the ever-changing political milieu in which he operated, from the Late Postclassic to the Early Colonial period (Saunders 2001, 225–27).

Hitherto, with the exception of Guilhem Olivier (2003), a sustained analysis of Tezcatlipoca has been long overdue. This volume begins to redress the balance and focuses on a wide variety of approaches to one of the most intriguing and complex deities of the Mesoamerican world. In this brief introductory essay, we attempt an interdisciplinary overview, building on the volume’s specialist contributions but extending into the realm of what is often called “material culture studies” (e.g., Buchli 2002; Tilley et al. 2006). Our focus is on the relationships among landscape, deity, and constructions of worldview as mediated by objects and their role in ideological enforcement.

A GOD IN THE LANDSCAPE

Obsidian mirrors, like Tezcatlipoca himself, are ambiguous (see Klein, this volume). Their raw material is mined from the earth and shaped by people, and, if we believe ethnohistorical sources, they appear to give their owner access to the intangible world of reflections, where souls, spirits, and the immanent forces of the cosmos dwell. From this perspective, it is hardly surprising, though in no way predictable, that Tezcatlipoca is a potent combination of such power imagery whose name is a linguistic apotheosis of Aztec conceptual thought—the “Lord of the Smoking Mirror” (Nicholson 1971, 412).

Tezcatlipoca’s omnipresence was commented upon by Sahagún (1950–82, book III: 11), who said “his abode was everywhere—in the land of the dead, on earth, [and] in heaven.” Like the wind he is invisible, and like a shadow he moves across the land (*ibid.*, book I: 5). In other words, Tezcatlipoca crosses spatial and mythical boundaries with impunity, as a truly shaman-like transformative figure (Saunders 1990, 166–67). This shamanic quality, albeit lifted to the level of an imperial state divinity, was also expressed by his omniscience and represented by the wielding of his eponymous magical obsidian mirror (*tezcatl*), itself a metaphor for rulership

and power (Heyden 1991, 195), with which he “knows everything” and is able to see into the hearts of men (Sahagún 1950–82, book III: 11).

Such was the semantic proximity of material and deity that obsidian was considered a manifestation of Tezcatlipoca (Ruiz de Alarcón 1984, 229). Fray Diego Durán (1971, 98) observed that the god’s temple image was of a lustrous stone, black as jet, from which sharp blades and knives were made (cf. Heyden 1988, 222). The relationship of Tezcatlipoca and the overlapping physical and supernatural associations of obsidian illustrate Alfred Gell’s (1992, 44) point that “the *technology of enchantment* is founded on the *enchantment of technology*” (original emphasis).

The associations between Tezcatlipoca and obsidian (in its various cultural forms) were extended into the realm of animal symbolism as represented by the god’s relationship with the jaguar (*Panthera onca* [ocelotl]). Across Mesoamerica and South America, the jaguar was the salient predator of the natural world, a prototype for cultural categories of agonistic activities such as hunting, warfare, and sacrifice and as the spirit familiar par excellence of shamans, priests, and political leaders (Benson 1998; Roe 1998; Saunders 1991). Aztec jaguar symbolism shared this wider conceptual categorization of the feline, finding expression, for example, in its ocelotl warrior cadre and the nocturnal predatory nature of Tezcatlipoca himself (Saunders 1990; also see Sahagún 1950–82, book XI: 1).

A dramatic example of Tezcatlipoca’s feline associations is his transformational manifestation as the jaguar Tepeyollotl (Jiménez Moreno 1979, 28), sometimes represented as such in the codices (e.g., Codex Borbonicus, Seler 1904, figure 28a). In the Codex Telleriano-Remensis, Tezcatlipoca’s face emerges from the jaws of a large feline, and on the carved-stone “Hackmack Box,” Cecelia Klein (1987, 334) identifies the individual engaging in auto-sacrificial bloodletting as Tezcatlipoca, in his guise as Tepeyollotl, because of his spotted-feline apparel.

The identification of Tezcatlipoca with the feline is enshrined in Aztec mythology, where he is described as a nocturnal deity whose alter ego was the jaguar (Caso 1958, 14–15). In a typically shamanic association, he was also the patron of sorcerers who manipulated the animal’s claws, pelt, and heart in their magical activities (Sahagún 1950–82, book XI: 3).

The conceptualization of the jaguar in Aztec natural philosophy penetrated many levels of everyday life, not least astronomical phenomena, where he was associated with the moon and the constellation Ursa Major and his omniscience was perhaps connected to his identification with the planet Jupiter, which appeared to dominate the night sky (Olivier, this volume). Those individuals born under the sign of the month called Ocelotl were regarded as possessing the attributes of strength and aggressiveness signified by the jaguar (Durán 1971, 402) and thus as particularly suitable to lead a warrior’s life. Similarly, terms with ocelotl as their root were applied

adjectively to individuals who displayed the appropriate qualities: thus, *ocelopetatl* and *oceloyotl* were considered particularly appropriate terms to describe valiant warriors and the qualities of valor and bravery in general (Siméon 1988 [1885], 352).

A concentration of jaguar imagery was, perhaps inevitably, associated with the clothing and paraphernalia of Aztec royalty. Sahagún (1950–82, book VIII: 23–25) relates that Aztec emperors adorned themselves with jaguar/ocelotl capes, breech cloths, and sandals made of the animal's pelt and that they wore an insignia of ocelotl skin into battle (Siméon 1988 [1885], 352). This symbolic identification is also revealed in royalty's privileged access to ocelotl-skin thrones, mats, and cushions (Sahagún 1950–82, book VIII: 31) as an expression of authority and rulership (Dibble 1971, 324). This tripartite association of Tezcatlipoca, the jaguar, and rulership characterizes the deity's role as patron of royalty and his appearance in rituals of royal accession, in which mirror symbolism is also prominent (Saunders 1990, 167–68). This elite association has pan-Mesoamerican resonance as, among the Maya, Kawil was a “royal” god linked with ruling lineages (Milbrath, this volume) and many Maya rulers incorporated the deity into their personal names, particularly at Tikal (Martin and Grube 2000).

Tezcatlipoca brings together and creatively recombines obsidian, mirrors, elite status, sacrifice, and age-old ideas concerning the jaguar. Late Postclassic codices preserve the iconographic evidence for this symbolic equation in representations of Tezcatlipoca with his left foot replaced by a “smoking mirror” and a jaguar head (Seler 1904, figure 28a) and displaying his stream of blood: *ezpitzal* (Batalla Rosado, this volume). The smoking mirror symbol (which replaces the left foot)—the *atl tlachinolli* glyph—might refer to the billowing smoke and dust of a battlefield, as the term *tlachinolli* appears to be associated with battlefield cremations of dead warriors (Brundage 1979, 247), those who have made the ultimate blood sacrifice for the Aztec state and cosmos.

The co-identification of Tezcatlipoca and Tepeyollotl—at least in part—further elaborates such ideas. Tepeyollotl means “Heart of the Mountain,” and according to Heyden (1981, 25), obsidian is the “heart of the earth.” *Yollotl* signifies “heart”—the human heart being the most precious offering humans could make to the gods (López Austin 1973, 60).

It can be argued that the chthonic associations of both Tezcatlipoca and his jaguar familiar, Tepeyollotl, are related to the geological origins of obsidian, drawing on Aztec (and wider Mesoamerican) beliefs concerning the “sacred earth,” caves as portals to the spirit world, and the notion of the earth as the progenitor of fertility for humans, animals, and flora (Saunders 2004).

The use of obsidian blades in acts of human blood sacrifice (including auto-sacrifice), whose spiritual and ideological purpose is to reinforce, maintain, and induce

fertility and thereby guarantee physical and cosmic survival, might be considered an integral part of a Tezcatlipoca cult (Saunders 1994, 178–80).

The symbolic complexities of Tezcatlipoca's relationship with the earth and obsidian, and their etymological combination and representation in the name "Lord of the Smoking Mirror," may embrace elements of the pre-Aztec and Aztec observation and classification of their distinctive physical environment. The Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan was built on an island in the center of Lake Texcoco in the tectonically active central highlands of Mexico. This was (and remains) a landscape of fuming geological vents, smoking volcanoes, and snow-covered peaks, around which fog, mist, and rain clouds gathered (see Townsend 1987, 373).

The prominent volcano Popocatepetl is represented in the Codex Mendoza with four volutes of smoke and identified as "the mountain which smokes"; smoke is the "word" of the volcano, signifying its presence as a spiritually alive entity, and its fumes express premonitions and oracles (Roiz 1997, 90). Beneath its peak lies Lake Texcoco, which steams in the morning and at dusk. This was a region from which many different kinds of smoke and fumes emanated, each kind possessing its own metaphysical qualities and associations and whose interrelationships defined the Aztec (and wider Mesoamerican) view of the world (Saunders, in press).

The association of smoke and shadows in Aztec metaphysics extends these associations with Tezcatlipoca further still. An individual's cosmic identity is signified as his or her *tonalli*, recognized as "life force," associated linguistically with a person's shadow (López Austin 1988, 205–6). Tezcatlipoca played an important role in this respect, as he brought illness, misfortune, and death by casting his shadow (Sahagún 1950–82, book I: 5): "he was . . . like the night, like the wind. On the occasions when he called to someone, he spoke like a shadow" (López Austin 1988, 218). More widely, he was believed to be a master of transformation, a trickster, who had the power to cheat and betray individuals (Olivier 2003, 30, 270). In prayers designed to appease him, the Aztec intoned "O master . . . May thy smoke, the cloud [of thy ire] cease; may the fire, the blaze [of thy rage] be extinguished" (Sahagún 1950–82, book VI: 4–5).

These interlocking complexities of Tezcatlipoca's nature, multiple roles, and metaphorical attributes illustrate (albeit briefly here) the extent to which his influence penetrated Aztec belief and social action across all levels of Late Postclassic central Mexican culture. Once the interpretive framework was in place, everyday life reinforced it. Seeing one's reflection in water, encountering (or even dreaming of encountering) a feline in the night, watching mist blown by the wind from atop Popocatepetl or smoke curling up from a copal censer or a burned-blood offering—all could be signs of Tezcatlipoca's presence in the world.

Such attitudes, of course, were not an Aztec invention; they were part of an ancient and distinctive Mesoamerican engagement with the world (Houston and Taube 2000), a product of symbolic analogical reasoning. Yet while this worldview was an ancestral legacy, it was actively reconfigured by a pre-Aztec, then Aztec, political reality in the Valley of Mexico, from which emerged an ideological imperative couched in terms of an all-seeing, all-controlling, and ever-present god.