

Back to the Womb: Caves, Sweatbaths and Sacred Water in Ancient Mesoamerica

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In ancient Mesoamerican cosmology the earth was considered as female, and earthly waters were related to this female principle. Caves and sweatbaths were portals into this female domain, metaphorically regarded as the vagina and womb of the earth mother, and so were closely associated with the female earth/fertility deity complex. This paper will consider the relationship between sacred water and religious practices affiliated with female deities, such as childbirth, ritual cleansing, healing, etc. Examples will be drawn from codices, ethnohistorical accounts, and from the archaeological record.

Introduction

In ancient Mesoamerican cosmology, the earth was considered as female, and earthly waters were related to this female principle. Caves and sweatbaths were portals into this watery domain, metaphorically regarded as the vagina and womb of the earth mother, and so were closely associated with the female earth/fertility deity complex (Milbrath 1988). This paper will consider the relationship between sacred water and religious practices affiliated with female deities, such as childbirth, ritual cleansing, and healing. Examples will be drawn from codices, ethnohistorical accounts, and from the archaeological record.

For the Mexica, Teteo-Innan was the 'mother of the gods' as well as the 'heart of the earth' (Sahagún 1950-82 [1547-85], Book 1:15). The female earth/fertility complex included numerous aspects of this principal deity, including Tonantzin, Cihuacoatl, Xochiquetzal, Toci and Chalchiutlicue (Nicholson 1971). Chalchiutlicue was the elder sister of the rain gods (Sahagún 1950-82 [1547-85], Book 1:21), and she presided over earthly waters in contrast to the more masculine-linked celestial waters, especially rain. Ethnohistorical accounts record numerous references to women making offerings to the goddess of terrestrial waters (e.g., Durán 1971 [1576-79]:269). At the Early Postclassic

UA-1 house (McCafferty 2007), broken female figurines were found in the bottom of wells, perhaps as a petition to the supernatural forces.

Just as the Aztec goddess Teteo-Innan gave birth to the gods from her earthly body, other Mesoamerican cultures incorporated earth-birth into their origin myths. The Mixtec *Codex Selden* (1964:1) depicts a celestial deity hurling an *atlatl* lance into a mountain top, from which emerges a mythical lineage founder (Figure 1). Similarly, the founders of the 4 Rabbit lineage in the *Codex Nuttall* are shown together in a cave, before emerging to found the dynasty of the Ascending Feathered Serpent (*Codex Nuttall* 1975:14-15). Among the Maya, as recounted in the *Popol Vuh* (Bassie 2002), humankind was created in a cave by the Corn Goddess, who formed them from ground maize. This myth closely parallels the Nahua myth of Quetzalcoatl forming humans from the bones of the earth goddess and maize while in the underworld.

Art historian Susan Milbrath (1988) has found iconographic linkages between caves (as entrances to the earth) and the vagina (as the entrance to the womb and especially as the point of emergence for newborn infants). She cites, for example, the Mixtec founding queen 3 Flint Shell Quechquemiltl, who enters a vagina-like cave immediately after giving birth (Figure 2). This cave may be the same underworld place where she first met her male consort on *Codex Nuttall* page 14. Both of these cave places feature multiple U-shaped openings, which Milbrath, and also Doris Heyden (1981, 2000), equate with the Nahua *Chicomoztoc*, the place of seven caves. The Nahua *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (1976 [1547-60]) describes and illustrates the creation of the Nahua people from *Chicomoztoc*, illustrated as a cave with seven chambers (Figure 3). Heyden (2000; also Manzanilla 2000; Manzanilla *et al.* 1998) notes that the artificial 'cave' located beneath

Teotihuacan's Pyramid of the Sun features similar chambers.

Natural caves in the southern valley of Puebla were artificially modified with "flower-like" entrances (Patricio Davalos, personal communication), that resemble the Mixtec 'vagina as cave entrance' described by Milbrath. Following this association, Mexica mythology notes that 'fragrant flowers' were created when a hummingbird nipped at the vagina of the goddess Xochiquetzal (G. McCafferty and S. McCafferty 1999). The Nahua *Codex Borgia* (1963) represents the goddess Tlazolteotl in the birthing position, with a flower emerging from her vagina (Figure 4). The third month of the Aztec calendar was associated with the "first fruits of the flowers," and was celebrated by those who had worn the flayed skins of sacrificial victims entering a cave in the Yopico pyramid (Sahagún 1950-82 [1547-85], Book 2:5). There they removed the skins, emerged naked and were bathed, much like newborn babies or the first fruits of the spring.

Just as the vagina is the place of emergence for female fluids, caves are often regarded as a source of terrestrial waters. Streams emerging from caves are a common theme in central Mexican codices. For example, the mountain entered by the Mixtec Lady 3 Flint also has a river flowing from it. Diego Durán (1971 [1576-79]:268) recorded that streams that flowed down from the snow-capped Popocatepetl volcano in central Mexico were highly revered, and were visited by pilgrims who brought rich gifts to the sacred waters and to the caves from which they sprang. Sahagún (1950-82 [1547-85], Book 11:247) described mountains as being like water jars covered with earth and rock: "[t]his mountain of water, this river, springs from there, the womb of the mountain. For from there Chalchiuhtlicue sends it." The concept of 'water-mountain,' or *altepetl* in Nahuatl, is an important metaphor for place in Nahua worldview, as seen at Cholula's Great Pyramid (McCafferty 2001, this volume). A spring beneath the pyramid emerges on the east side of the mound, where a modern shrine has been erected over a deep well; the water is reputed to have healing powers as well as promote fertility. The same spring is shown in the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (1976 [1547-60]: plate 9v-10r) emerging from beneath

the pyramid (Figure 5). Returning again to the Maya world, Karen Bassie's recent project at Jolja' cave demonstrates a long-standing regard for a cave with an associated stream.

To summarise, the concept of the earth as feminine force is common throughout Mesoamerica, and in fact is found in many Native American belief systems. By extension, entrances to the earth are metaphoric portals into the female body, and water that comes from the earth is conceptually related to feminine fluid. The *Maya Codex Madrid* demonstrates this principle in a representation of the old Goddess O, who secretes fluid from her breasts and from between her legs. A parallel image is found in the Battle Mural of Cacaxtla, where one of the captured female war chiefs is shown with water symbols at her breast and below her skirt (S. McCafferty and G. McCafferty 1994).

Toci was the old goddess of the Nahua, called 'our grandmother,' and she was specifically associated with sweatbaths and midwives. In the *Codex Magliabechiano*, an old woman sits in front of a *temazcal* sweatbath that is decorated with an image of Toci (Figure 6). The *Florentine Codex* of Sahagún (1950-82 [1547-85], Book 6:151-152; Book 11:191) records abundant information on the healing practices that took place in sweatbaths, particularly of the ministrations of midwives for pregnant women. Durán (1971 [1576-79]:269-272) offers a lengthy description of what went on in Nahua *temazcales*:

These bathhouses are heated with fire and are like small, low huts. Each one can hold ten persons in a squatting position; standing is impossible ... The entrance is very low and narrow. People enter one by one and on all fours. In the back part there is a small furnace which heats the place. The heat is such that it is almost unbearable ... People sweat there only because of the heat of the bath and its steam ... After having perspired thoroughly there, they wash themselves with cold water outside of the bathhouse ... It frightens one to see someone with an exposed body, having sweated for one hour, abandon the bathhouse, be bathed, receive the splash of ten or twelve pitchers of water, without fear of any harm. Truly this seems brutal ... If a Spaniard were

to go through this, he would go into shock and become paralyzed...

[T]here was a god of the baths. When a bathhouse was to be built, after this deity had been consulted, offered sacrifices, and presented with many gifts, all the people of the ward where the bathhouse was to be erected took the small stone idol and buried it ... where the building was to be constructed ... [this idol] was usually given sacrifice, offerings, and incense, especially before people entered to bathe.

There existed a diabolical superstition and belief about this: when women went to bathe, if they were not accompanied by a man or two, they dared not enter, considering it ill fortune. In the same way ... a man dare[d] not enter if a woman d[id] not accompany him ... I would not hold all this to be so unchaste and immodest if the husband entered with his wife, but at times there is so much confusion and laxity that, mingled and naked as they are, there cannot fail to be great affronts and offenses to our Lord.

Durán (1971 [1576-79]:271) continues:

If someone should suspect or discover that the ugly and torpid custom of males and females bathing together still exists, he would do well to prevent and punish it so as not to revive an evil of the forgotten past. I myself have torn down some of these bathhouses in order to cause fear ... For my own satisfaction I wanted to find, seek out, the idol which they claimed was buried there below, to find it for myself. It turned out to be an ugly and monstrous stone face.

Actual *temazcales* from the Puebla valley are similar in construction, combining a small fire box, usually accessible from the outside, with the steam chamber (Figure 7). Contemporary sweatbaths are smaller than the one described by Durán, perhaps relating more to household level, as opposed to communal, use. An archaeological *temazcal* was found by Dan Wolfman in his excavations of an Early Postclassic house on the outskirts of Cholula (McCafferty 1992:120-122; 2007). It measured about one meter in diameter, and featured an elongated chamber that probably

served as access to the fire box (Figure 8). The adobes of the sweatbath were fire-reddened from the intense heat of the fire. A large ceramic figurine head was found beneath the *temazcal*, perhaps an 'idol' such as the one described by Durán. Although bodiless, and therefore unsexed, it featured facial characteristics similar to those of Xipe Totec, a deity associated with springtime and flayed skin, but also of skin disease. Note, however, that the goddess Tlazolteotl was also associated with the practice of wearing the skin of flayed sacrificial victims.

Figurines were also encountered in association with *temazcales* by Susan Evans (1990) in her excavations at Cihuatecpan in the Basin of Mexico. She interpreted the presence of specifically female figurines as a connection between sweatbaths and the midwives and healers described in ethnohistorical sources.

Sweatbaths were known colloquially as 'flower houses,' *xochicalli*. This name derives in part from their use in curing rituals, where midwives and healers affiliated with the goddesses Toci and Xochiquetzal employed aromatic herbs to treat all manner of illnesses, and to assist in childbirth. Sahagún (1950-82 [1547-85], Book 11:191) describes how healers use the sweat bath to cure ailments and to prepare women for childbirth. When a woman went into labour she was sent into the *temazcal* (Sahagún 1950-82 [1547-85], Book 6:167): "Verily now, introduce her into the *xochicaltzin* of our lady, the place where the mother, the grandmother, the lady Yoalticiltl fortifieth [the body of the baby]" (Sahagún 1950-82 [1547-85], Book 6:151-152).

Since procreation and childbirth are a messy business, bathing was important to cleanse the newborn to remove the *tlazolli* of the parents, resulting from their sexual contact (Burkhardt 1989:113). The goddess Chalchiutlicue was again invoked in this process, with the midwife addressing the newborn: "Approach thy mother, Chalchiutlicue! May she receive thee! May she remove, may she transfer, the filthiness which thou hast taken from thy mother, from thy father" (Sahagún 1950-82 [1547-85], Book 6:175).

Bathing the newborn was an important rite of passage, since at this time the child was also assigned its calendrical name and therefore its

destiny. Book IV of the *Florentine Codex* provides numerous examples of calendar dates and their significance, in association with bathing scenes (Figure 9). This was also the time when infants received gifts relating to their future occupations. In the Mixtec *Codex Nuttall* (1975:16), the newborn 3 Flint is lowered into a watery underworld where she is welcomed by old gods. At the base of the Temple of the Flowers at Xochitecatl, huge basalt basins may relate to bathing ceremonies associated with childbirth and female ritual (Serra Puche 2001). The presence of many ceramic figurines of pregnant women, and women with infants, supports the association of this site with female fertility.

Ritual bathing was an important characteristic of Mesoamerican religion, used to purify both the body and soul of the general population, sacrificial victims, and the deceased. Louise Burkhart (1989:110-114) discusses the importance of bathing for the ablution of 'sin' in native society, using the Nahuatl word *tlazolli* which translates more accurately as "filth."

Sweatbaths were used for more mundane medicinal practices as well. Book 11 of the *Florentine Codex* (Sahagún 1950-82 [1547-85], Book 11:167) describes treatment of those with frazzled nerves, who were calmed through massage. Durán (1971 [1576-79]:270-272) tells us of specialists, including dwarfs and hunchbacks, who flogged bathers with corn husks. Others fanned the bathers in order to blow away illness and maintain health.

Conclusion

In this paper we have linked Mesoamerican concepts of caves, terrestrial waters, and sweatbaths to members of the female earth/fertility cult. Teteo-Innan was the earth herself, and from her womb sprang both mortal and supernatural beings. Caves served as portals to her subterranean realm, and were important arenas for ritual practice. Cave entrances were likened to the vagina, and were represented symbolically as flowers. Water from mountains and caves were associated with Chalchiutlicue, and offerings were made to her for both agricultural and biological fertility. Sweatbaths, or 'flower houses,' were artificial structures that were metaphors for natural caves, and thus were

also entrances to the female domain. To enter a *temazcal*, one had to crawl through a "navel-like opening" (Sahagún 1950-82 [1547-85], Book 11:275), where they had to squat in a fetal position while bathing. Thus, to enter a sweatbath was to literally return to the womb of the earth mother, while exiting was to be born again, purified and renewed.

Acknowledgement

One of the great things about the University of Calgary has been the opportunity to work closely with Dr. David Kelley. This has taken the form of semi-formal discussion groups on all things Mesoamerican, his occasional guest appearances in classes where new generations are introduced to his brilliance, and particularly the many brain-storming sessions with pre-Columbian manuscripts spread over any flat surface of the Kelley house. Professor Kelley is renowned for the breadth of his knowledge and for his creative thinking, covering topics that extend across Mesoamerica, and well beyond. High among these themes, at least from our perspective, is his encyclopedic knowledge of Postclassic codices and related ethnohistoric sources. Dave is not famous for his command of Mixtec history, but he should be. One of our first and fondest memories of Dave is sitting in a hole-in-the-wall dim-sum restaurant in Boston where he fascinated students and colleagues, and the Chinese kitchen staff, with his readings from assorted Mixtec codices. His interpretations structured the histories in ways which we had never before considered, and incorporated heretical notions (at least to Mixtec purists) that related Mixtec actors to pan-Mesoamerican events. This seamless vision of Mesoamerica (and beyond) is one of the things that distinguishes Dr. Kelley and his legacy to Mesoamerican studies. Our paper draws from this vision.

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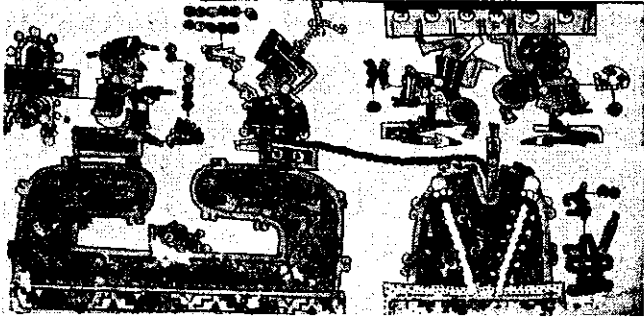


Figure 1. Earth-birth scene from *Codex Selden*.

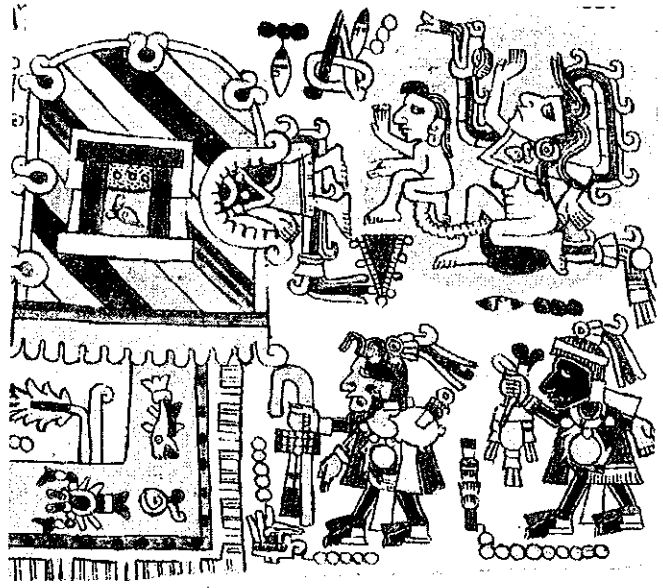


Figure 2. Lady 3 Flint - Shell Quechquemiltl entering cave after giving birth (*Codex Nuttall*).



Figure 3. Chicomoztoc as cave of origin (*Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* 1976).

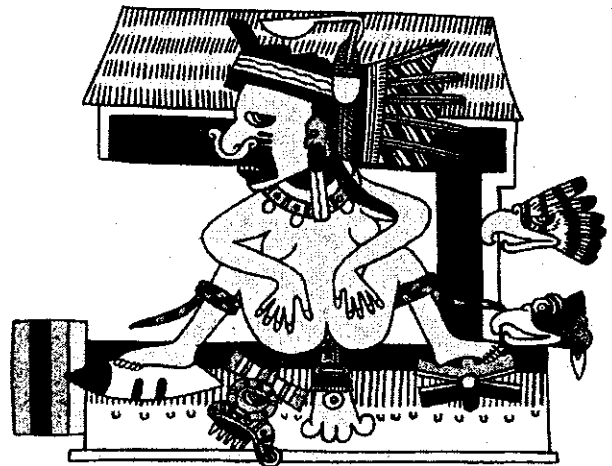


Figure 4. Goddess Tlazolteotl in birthing position, with flower emerging from vagina (*Codex Borgia*).



Figure 5. Stream emerging from cave beneath Great Pyramid of Cholula (*Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* 1976, plate 9v-10r).

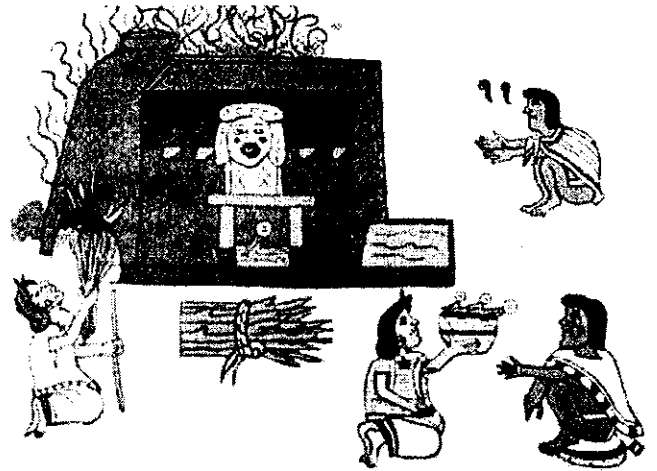


Figure 6. Old goddess Toci in front of a sweatbath (*Codex Magliabecchiano* 1983, plate 77r).

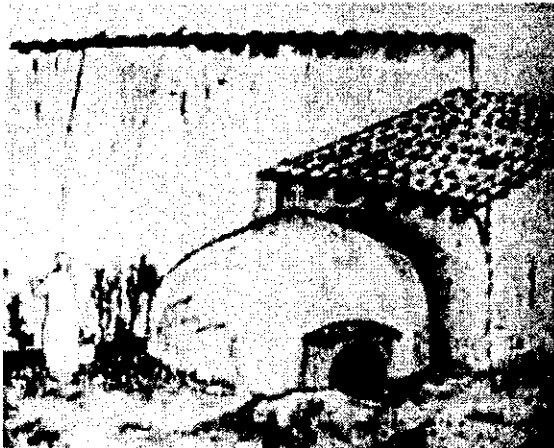


Figure 7. *Temazcales* from the Puebla region.



Figure 8. *Temazcal* from UA-1, Structure 1 at Cholula.



Figure 9. Bathing ritual and assnigation of birth name and destiny (*Florentine Codex*).

Caves are central to the cosmologies of many world cultures, used by humans from the dawn of time. The Sacred Cenote was strictly dedicated to religious rituals and ceremonies, that at times, involved human sacrifice, as remains found at its bottom testify. The second cenote, the Xtoloc (Iguana) in the city, among others in the vicinity, supplied water to the community. Today as in the past, zuhuyaha is believed to be the most sacred water in Maya rituals, since it is collected from stalactites, called the "nipples of the earth". Dating back thousands of years are numerous examples of ancient technology that leave us awe-struck at the knowledge and wisdom held by people of our past. They were the result of incredible advances. For the ancient Aztecs the highest form of sacred communication was poetry, what they called xochicuicatl ("flower-song"). These were delicately beautiful hymns meant to be recited orally, often to musical accompaniment. In paintings, Aztec poets are depicted with speech scrolls issuing from their mouths. In Classic Maya art, the open jaws represent a portal that leads from this world to the world of the gods. In his or her hand is a calligraphic paintbrush used to both write and illustrate the ancient Maya codex books. The message of this incised bone is that the activities of the scribe come closest to those of the gods themselves, who paint the realities of this world as divine artists.