Weaving the Aztec Cosmos: The Metaphysics of the 5th Era

This article has been generously written specially for us by James Maffie, Visiting Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy Affiliate, Latin American Studies Center, University of Maryland (USA). The article contains many words and terms that younger students will not understand. We let it stand as it is for the benefit of those who can grasp and learn from the profound concepts and ideas that it outlines. We will be publishing later a highly simplified version for children...

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Pic 1: Aztec wise men, Florentine Codex Book 10 (Click on image to enlarge)

metaphysics? Metaphysics seeks to understand the nature, structure, and constitution of reality at the broadest and most comprehensive level. Questions concerning the nature of existence, causality, time, space, consciousness, body, and the relationship between humans and the cosmos are among the questions traditionally addressed by metaphysicians.

Pre-Columbian societies included individuals who reflected systematically upon the nature of reality, human existence, knowledge, proper conduct, and goodness. The Nahuatl-speaking peoples or Nahuas of Central Mexico – including those residing in Mexico-Tenochtitlan known today as the "Aztecs" - were no exception. Aztec *tlamatinime* (literally, "knowers of things") i.e., sages or philosophers, sought answers to such questions as "What is the nature of things?", "What is real?", "What is good?" "How shall we live?", and "What

can humans know?".

I focus upon Aztec metaph ysics. What is



Pic 2: The Aztec world: partial view of Tenochtitlan and surrounding lake region with dike; detail of painting by Luis Covarrubias (Click on image to enlarge)

Aztec metaphysics thus consists of the Aztecs' understanding of the nature, structure, and constitution of reality. It served as the foundation of Aztec religious and ritual practice as well as Aztec thought about knowledge, morality, beauty, politics, economics, agriculture, and war.



Pic 3: The power of water quintessential 'teotl' (Click on image to enlarge)

Aztec metaphysics is defined by four key views: metaphysical monism; constitutional monism; process metaphysics; and horizontal metaphysics. Metaphysical monism claims there exists only one thing. (Monism means "one.") Aztec metaphysics claims there exists ultimately just one thing: dynamic, vivifying, eternally self-generating and self-regenerating power, force, or energy-in-motion. The Aztecs referred to this as *teotl*. (You might think of teotl as something like electricity.) All existing things – cosmos, sun, stars, moon, wind, water, rain, sunshine, thunderstorms, mountains, lakes, trees, plants, animals, humans, etc. - are in the final analysis merely aspects of teotl because they are one with teotl. The apparent multiplicity of distinctly existing things is thus illusory, seeing as there exists only one thing: teotl.

Lastly, the Aztecs regarded teotl as sacred.

Second, constitutional monism claims that all everything is made up of just *one* kind of stuff. For the Aztecs, this is teotl (sacred energy). Because teotl consists entirely of energy-in-motion, it follows that all existing things consist of just one kind of stuff: sacred energy. It follows that there is no substantial difference

that they are superior or higher than humans.

Fourth,

process



Pic 4: Sunset, northern Mexico (Click on image to enlarge)

between humans and non-human things, including what we (but not the Aztecs) call "nature" and "the environment." Although the Aztecs regarded certain aspects of teotl to be invisible to humans, they did not believe these aspects were therefore made up of a different kind of stuff

believe these aspects were therefore made up of a different kind of stuff from humans or "nature."



Pic 5: Above and below, one and the same level; detail of mural by R. Anguiano (1964), National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City (Click on image to enlarge)

metaphysics maintains that processes (e.g. the changing of the seasons, hurricanes, flowing rivers, ocean waves, and aging humans) rather than perduring substantive objects (e.g., books, tables, trees, and mountains) are the basic components of reality. What we ordinarily think of as perduring objects are in reality processes. This makes sense seeing as everything is identical with teotl, and teotl is never-ending energy-inmotion. Process, becoming, movement, change, and transformation define teotl and hence all of reality. Humans, trees, sun, rivers, mountains, etc. are always changing, always becoming, always in a

Third, horizontal metaphysics denies the existence of a hierarchical (vertical) distinction between transcendent and immanent, higher and lower, sacred and profane, or supernatural and natural realms, realities, or kinds of stuff. All things (e.g. cosmos, wind, rain, mountains, trees, humans, and the dead) exist on the same level. All are equally real. (By contrast, the vertical metaphysics of Christianity claims reality is ordered by a hierarchy of transcendent vs. immanent, higher vs. lower, sacred vs. profane, or supernatural vs. natural realms, realities, beings, etc.) Although certain aspects of teotl are invisible to humans, it does not mean

Pic 6: Human couple in stone; Mexica sculpture, National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City (Click on image to enlarge)

process of transformation.



Pic 7: The birth of the twenty-day-count, Codex Borgia, folio 30 (detail) (Click on image to enlarge)

Aztec philosophy conceives time and space as a single, seamless unity: what I call time-place. Time-place is a pattern in the *modus operandi* of teotl's continual unfolding and becoming. Time-place is *how* teotl moves; it is not a thing. The three sacred Aztec calendars – the *tonalpohualli*, *xiuhpohualli*, and *xiuhmolpilli* - are patterns in the unfolding of teotl.

Aztec metaphysics is pantheistic, not polytheistic. Polytheism claims that there exist many gods. The various alleged "gods" of the so-called "Aztec pantheon" such as Quetzalcoatl, Tlaloc, and Huitzilopochtli, are nothing more than kaleidoscopic aspects or facets of teotl. For the Aztecs everything that exists constitutes a

single, all-inclusive, and interrelated unity.

This allencompassing unity is constituted by teotl as well as identical with teotl. The unity is genealogically unified by teotl

since it unfolds out of teotl. The cosmos emerges and burgeons from teotl. Teotl is not the "creator" ex nihilo of the cosmos in a theistic sense but rather the immanent engenderer of the cosmos. What's more, teotl is not a god or deity. So, if we define "theism" as the belief in the existence of a person-like god who is in some sense separate from the world, Aztec metaphysics (and religion) are *non*-theistic. The history of the cosmos is simply the self-unfolding and self-presenting of teotl. Lastly, this single, all-inclusive unity is sacred because teotl itself is sacred.



Pic 8: 'The cosmos emerges and burgeons from teotl'; detail of mural by R. Anguiano (1964), National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City (Click on image to enlarge)



Pic 9: Stone skull, Dolores Olmedo Museum, Mexico City (Click on image to enlarge)

Teotl's ceaseless changing and self-transforming are characterized by what I call agonistic inamic unity. "Inamic" is the Nahuatl term for matched polarities such as male~female, life~death, dry~wet, being~non-being, and order~disorder. (The Aztecs however did not include good and evil among these!) Agonistic inamics represent dual aspects of teotl – not two, metaphysically distinct substances or kinds of stuff. Inamics are mutually arising, interdependent, and complementary as well as mutually competitive.

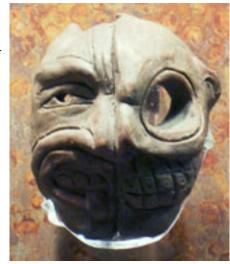
Take life~death. Life and death are mutually arising, interdependent, complementary, and competing aspects of one and the same process. They are inextricably bound to one another since neither can exist without the other. Life without death is impossible, just as is death without life. Life contains the seed of death; death, the fertile, energizing seed of life. Life feeds off the death of other things, and so has a negative aspect. Death feeds life, and so has a positive aspect. In short, life and death are ambiguous: both positive and negative. The Pre-Columbian artists of Tlatilco and Sovaltepec expressed this relationship by fashioning a split-faced mask: one-half alive, one-half skull-like. The masks are intentionally ambiguous. Skulls simultaneously symbolize death and life, since life springs from the bones of the dead. Flesh simultaneously symbolizes life and death, since death arises from living flesh.



Pic 11: Soyaltepec life-death mask (Click on image to enlarge)

The faces are thus neitheralive-nor-dead yet at the same time both-alive-and-

existing things is characterized by the cyclical,



The ceaseless changing of all Pic 10: Tlatilco life-death mask (Click on image to enlarge)

back-and-forth struggle between inamic pairs as well as the alternating dominance of each inamic over its matched polarity. All existing things are constituted by the agonistic unity of inamic polarities and therefore unstable and irreducibly ambiguous (like the life~death masks). Indeed, all reality is at bottom irreducibly ambiguous (like the life~death masks). The cyclical alternation and struggle between inamics is nonending, non-teleological (not goal-oriented), and non-moral (not a struggle between the

forces of good and evil).

Inamics complement, unite, and compete with one another in three principal ways: ollin, malinalli, and nepantla. Ollin, malinalli, and nepantla represent three different fundamental patterns of what I call motion-change. Aztec metaphysics views qualitative change such as being born, growing old, and dying as a species of movement. Together, these three define the dynamics of the cosmos of the 5th Era as well as explain the ordering, becoming, and diversity of the 5th Era. Understanding these three kinds of motion-change gives us insight into understanding why teotl's changes are regular, orderly, predictable, and transformative rather than chaotic and random.



Pic 13: Stone solar disc containing double quincunx, National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City (Click on

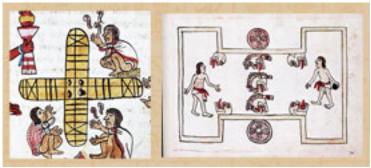


Pic 12: The daysign glyph for 'Ollin' (motion); illustration by Felipe Dávalos (Click on image to enlarge)

image to enlarge)

Nepantla motion-change interlaces, commingles, mixes and weaves together inamics in a way that is middling, betwixting-and-betweening, and abundant with mutuality and reciprocity. Nepantla motion-change unifies inamics in balanced, agonistic tension, and is thus destructively creative, creatively destructive, and transformative. Weaving and sexual commingling are paradigmatic nepantla processes. Nepantla motion-change is symbolized by such ideograms as the X-shaped cruciform (St. Andrew's cross), the + -shaped cruciform (Maltese cross), and the quincunx. These all serve as quintessential symbols of the 5th Era.

Nepantla is the most primordial cosmogonically and most metaphysically fundamental pattern of generative and transformative interaction in the cosmos. Nepantla-defined reciprocal motion-change generates as well as defines the ultimate fabric of the cosmos. It antedates both ollin and malinalli in the history of the cosmos. Nepantla-defined motion-change, agonistic inamic unity, and reciprocity have always existed since all three define teotl and teotl has always existed. Ollin and malinalli motion-change, by contrast, do not emerge until teotl further self-unfolds and self-differentiates. Nepantla subsumes and incorporates ollin and malinalli in a larger cosmic eurhythmy - much like a song's major musical rhythm incorporates the song's minor rhythms.



Pic 15: 4-cornered patolli board (L) and ballcourt (R); Codex Magliabecchiano folios 60 (L, detail) and 80 (R) (Click on image to enlarge)

oscilla

Olli n is puls atin

g,

osci



Pic 14: Page 1, Codex Fejérváry-Mayer (Click on image to enlarge)

llating, and centering motion-change. It is typified by bouncing balls, pulsating hearts, labor contractions, earthquakes, flapping butterfly wings, the undulating motion of weft activities in weaving, and the oscillating path of the 5th Sun over and under the surface of the earth (Tlalticpac). Ollin is the motion-change of cyclical completion, i.e., the kind of motion-change exhibited by something as it moves through the four phases of its life~death cycle. The

shape of ollin is thus the shape of a thing's four-phased path through life.

Because of this, it is the shape of the life-energy of the 5th Era, the 5th Sun, and all inhabitants of the 5th Era. Ollin motion-change unites agonistic inamics within an orderly, four-phased cycle. Since it is motion-change within a cycle, I call it horizontal motion-change. Ollin motion-change is symbolized by such ideograms as the quatrefoil, quincunx, X-shaped cruciform (St. Andrew's cross), + -shaped cruciform (Maltese cross), ballcourt, patolli board, four-petaled flower, four-winged butterfly, and the ollin daysign glyph. These serve as quintessential symbols of the 5th Era.



Pic 17: Spiral underside of Aztec stone rattlesnake sculpture, British Museum (Click on image to enlarge)

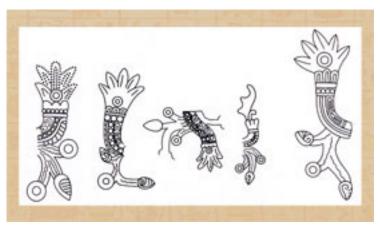
Malinalli motion-change is twisting, spinning, spiraling, drilling, coiling, and gyrating. It is the shape of energy transmission between vertical layers of the cosmos: upper world, earth, and underworld. (These layers consist of folds in teotl's single homogenous energy.) The vertical transmission of energy is organized principally into three patterns: the tonalpohualli, xiuhpohualli, and xiuhmolpilli. In addition, malinalli motionchange is the shape energy assumes as it is transformed from



Pic 16: 'Five-rose' rug design incorporating quincunx and spiral, Codex Magliabecchiano folio 5 (top), four-winged butterfly (bottom) (Click on image to enlarge)

raw (disordered) foodstuffs to cooked (ordered) foodstuffs. It is the shape of energy that nourishes human beings as well as earthly and heavenly forces.

Whereas ollin motion-change consists of transformation within a cycle, malinalli motion-change as nourishes and renews existing cycles as well as initiates new cycles. It is the shape of vertical energy transfusion and motion-change. Malinalli initiates and nourishes the four-phased, horizontal, ollin-defined cyclical completion and renewal of the 5th Sun, the 5th Era, and all existing things. It is symbolized by such ideograms as spirals, coils, twists, double helices, the atl tlachinolli, the xicalcoliuhqui, and the malinalli day sign glyph itself. The atl tlachinolli ("water burnt things") in particular serves as one of the quintessential symbols of the 5th Era.



Pic 19: 'Atl tlachinolli' ('water burnt things') - quintessential symbol of the 5th. era. Illustration by David Wright (Click on image



Pic 18: Spiralling stepped-fret design ('xicalcoliuhqui') on shield-motif jewellery (L) and cut shell motif, rug design; Codex Magliabecchiano folio 3 (R) (Click on image to enlarge)

to enlarge)

Nepantla, ollin, and malinalli ideograms all symbolize the 5th Era, suggesting that they jointly characterize the 5th Era. How do they unite to form the 5th Era? Weaving functions as one of the principal organizing metaphors of Aztec metaphysics. The Aztecs modeled the generation and regeneration of the 5th Era specifically upon backstrap weaving. Weaving is an instance of nepantla motion-change, and the Aztecs envisioned the 5th Era as a grand nepantla-defined weaving-in-progress, and saw teotl as a grand cosmic weaver who, via nepantla motion-change, generates and regenerates the 5th Era and all its inhabitants. Nepantla motion-change constitutes the creative motion of interlacing of warp and weft into the agonistic inamic unity that is reality. It generates as well as defines the very fabric of the cosmos. Weaving (nepantla-motion-change) is thus the fundamental transformative motion-change of the 5th Era.

How do ollin and malinalli figure into the weaving of the cosmos? Weaving fabric involves interlacing weft (horizontal) and weft (vertical) fibers. Ollin motion-change constitutes the horizontal, weft-related activities that contribute to the weaving the 5th Era. It functions as the 5th Era's weft motion. The 5th Era's weft motion is typified by the 5th Sun's ollin-defined, oscillating path above and below the earth Malinalli motion-change constitutes the vertical, warp-related activities that contribute to the weaving of the 5th Era. Malinalli motion-change functions as the 5th Era's warp motion. The three calendars -- the tonalpohualli, xiuhpohualli, and xiuhmolpilli, represent warp patterns in teotl's weaving of the 5th Era.

Suggested Reading:-

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Mastache, Alba Guadalupe (2005). "Weaving in Ancient Mexico," Debra Nagao (trans.) *Arqueología Mexicana, Edición Especial* 19:86-88. ... (2005). "Pre-Hispanic Weaving Techniques," Debra Nagao (trans.) *Arqueología Mexicana, Edición Especial* 19:88-89.

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Weaver," in *The Art and Iconography of Late Post-Classic Central Mexico*, Elizabeth Hill Boone (ed.). Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, pp.7-36.

Pic 20: Backstrap loom weaving: Florentine Codex Book 10 (top) and today (bottom) (Click on image to enlarge)

Picture sources:-

- Pix 1 & 20 top: images from the Florentine Codex (original in the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence) scanned from our own copy of the Club Internacional del Libro 3-volume facsimile edition, Madrid, 1994
- Pic 2: photo by Sean Sprague/Mexicolore
- Pix 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, 16 bottom, 17, 18 top, 20 bottom: photos by Ian Mursell/Mexicolore
- Pic 4: photo by Iain Pearson/Mexicolore
- Pic 7: image from the Codex Borgia scanned from our copy of the facsimile edition by ADEVA, Graz, Austria, 1976
- Pix 10 & 11: photos courtesy James Maffie
- Pic 12: illustration commissioned for Mexicolore by Felipe Dávalos
- Pic 13: photo by Ana Laura Landa/Mexicolore
- Pic 14: image from the Codex Fejérváry-Mayer scanned from our copy of the facsimile edition by ADEVA, Graz, Austria, 1971
- Pix 15, 16 top, 18 bottom: images scanned from our own copy of the ADEVA facsimile edition of the Codex Maglabechiano, Graz, Austria, 1970
- Pic 19: illustration courtesy David Wright

☑ James Maffie's article 'Aztec Philosophy', The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy