



Research Article

“The dear little flower babe has arrived!”: Blade stones, cradles, and child warriors in Ancient Mesoamerica

Stan Declercq 

Posgrado de Arqueología, Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Zapote s/n, I4030, Mexico City, Mexico

Abstract

In the present discussion, I will focus on the creation of baby warriors in Mesoamerica in a twofold manner: as human beings and as blade stones. The emphasis will be on central Mexico, complemented with essential data from other parts of Postclassic Mesoamerica. By juxtaposing information from historical sources in a novel way, this investigation seeks to offer new insights that should reinforce the idea that warriors captured on the battlefield were considered to be children. Although this idea has been suggested before, this article aims to contribute new historical evidence that not only confirms this notion but also widens our understanding of the creation of nonbiological offspring. Making kin out of Others aims to satisfy a cosmological need to incorporate vital energy and elements for individual and collective personhood from outside of the community. The second idea of this investigation focuses on a related productive variant of this gestational dynamic, suggesting that by stone flaking and chipping, children (of stone) were fabricated. Some of them were indeed “child blade stones” who personified warriors and fed themselves with sacrificial victims, securing sustenance for the hungry gods. I argue that the birth of these warriors should be integrated into a major mythological theme—namely, the Child Hero and the Old Adoptive Mother.

Resumen

En la presente discusión, me enfocaré en la creación de bebés guerreros en Mesoamérica de una doble manera: como seres humanos, pero también como piedras sacrificiales. El énfasis estará en el Centro de México, pero se complementa con datos esenciales de otras partes del Postclásico Mesoamericano. Al juxtaponer información de fuentes históricas de una manera novedosa, esta investigación busca ofrecer nuevos conocimientos que deberían reforzar la idea de que los guerreros capturados en el campo de batalla eran considerados como niños. Aunque esta idea ha sido sugerida anteriormente, este artículo pretende aportar nueva evidencia histórica que no solo confirme esta noción, sino que también amplíe nuestra comprensión de la creación de parentesco virtual. Hacer parientes de Otros (Vilaça 2002) pretende satisfacer una necesidad cosmológica de incorporar energía vital y elementos para la noción de persona, individual y colectiva, desde el exterior. La segunda idea principal de esta investigación se centra en una variante productiva relacionada con esta dinámica gestacional y sugiere que mediante el astillado de piedra se fabricaron hijos con raíces ancestrales. Algunos de ellos eran en realidad “piedras de cuchillos infantiles” que personificaban a los guerreros, se alimentaban con las víctimas de los sacrificios y aseguraban el sustento de los dioses hambrientos. En conclusión, argumento que el nacimiento de estos guerreros debe integrarse en un tema mitológico importante, a saber, el Niño Héroe y la Vieja Madre Adoptiva.

Keywords: Aztecs; virtual kinship; warfare; sacrificial stones; childbirth

It was Edward Seler (in *Códice Borgia* 1963:vol. I:25; see also Sullivan 1966:6) who, more than a century ago, first uncovered that in the cultures of ancient central Mexico, taking an enemy prisoner during war was the symbolic equivalent of giving birth to a child, and that by the same token, the death of a mother during childbirth was her symbolic death on the battlefield. According to the *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* (Tena 2011:39), the goddess

Xochiquetzal was the first woman to die in “war.” Effectively, as mentioned in the *Florentine Codex* (Sahagún 1950–1982:vol. VI:167; 2002:vol. II:611), a newborn baby was considered a captive: “And when the baby had arrived on earth, then the midwife shouted; she gave war cries, which meant that the little woman had fought a good battle, had become a brave warrior, had taken a captive, had captured a baby.” However, it was Olivier (2014–15:67; Sahagún 1950–1982:vol. VI:204) who called attention to the fact that the infant was called *yaotl* or “enemy,” which resulted in the question of why give birth to enemies? Olivier (2014–2015:66; Sahagún 1950–1982:vol. II:54) linked this idea to the fact that captured enemies were referred

Corresponding author: Stan Declercq, stan_declercq@hotmail.com

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to as the “sons” of the captors. The father–son kinship construction (a “*fusion mystique*,” Graulich 2005:165, 349–350) that existed on the battlefield, which partly explains the identification of the captor—the sacrifice—with the victim (Olivier 2010:466–467; 2015:341, 627), is also briefly mentioned by Benavente (1996:486). As we will see, the *Cantares Mexicanos* provides us with further evidence in support of this interpretation, given that warriors were frequently addressed as children or infants in these songs, gathered in the 1550s, 1560s and 1570s (Bierhorst 1985:25).

The assimilation of the Other into the society of the captor by way of kinship is certainly a frequent feature of Amerindian warfare ideology (Vilaça 2002; Santos-Granero 2009). In a previous study (Declercq 2020), I described how Nahuatl groups involved in the so-called Flowery Wars exchanged food and participated in ceremonial festivals and major events such as the enthronement or the death of a *tlatoani* but did not establish marriage relations with each other. Instead of the latter, the taking of captives during warfare seems to have been a means of social reproduction.

However, as stated above, kinship went beyond human beings in Mesoamerica and could involve the material world, as well as the world of invisible spirits and deities. Consequently, in Mesoamerica, “midwifery has no biological determinants” (Joyce 2001:125). All children—regardless of biological relationships or even raw material—were born in 9 Heaven as fragments of Mother Earth (Sahagún 1950–1982:vol. VI:94, 176). An ancestral womb, 9 Heaven, was occasionally described as a place of rocks, because long ago, the ancestors were transformed into monoliths (López Austin 2015; Sahagún 2002:vol. I:316). Such “meta-persons” made of stone play a role in cosmopolitics and bring us to the notion of the birth of “children made of stone,” sometimes with warrior personhoods and forms of intentionality. Central to the twofold notion of considering male adult captives and blade stones as newborn children is the assumption that both are, as Others and outsiders, ontologically less than human. Indeed, as Overholtzer and Robin (2015:1) observe, “mutually constitutive relationships between people and the material world” can be a clue to understanding Mesoamerican dynamics, and in our particular context, the gestation of children.

The birth of warrior gods

Before I proceed with a discussion of baby warriors themselves, it would benefit us to make some notes on the birth of the gods that the Aztecs worshiped, as recounted in various cosmogonic myths. I will restrict my analysis here only to the war gods. During the minor Feast of Pachtonli and of the goddess Xochiquetzal, at dawn, a group of priestesses from the temple of the Mexica war god Huitzilopochtli would stand guard over a large tub filled with corn dough until they “saw the footprint of a newborn babe impressed in the dough and the dough crumbling. On discovering that sign of the child, the trumpets, conch shells, and flutes resounded, and a great shout went up, announcing the arrival and birth of the warrior, who in their language is called Yaotzin (“Small Enemy in War”)

(Durán 1971:241). “And Uitzilopochtli just then was born. Then he had his array with him, his shield, and his darts and his blue dart thrower” (Sahagún 1950–1982:vol. III:4). In other words, he “emerged fully armed from the womb of his mother Coatlicue” (Olivier 2021:59). In a song referring to the famous myth of the battle of Coatepec (“Snake Hill”), where Huitzilopochtli defeats his sister and his four hundred brothers or uncles, it was said, “On her shield the virgin girl grows large. At the call to the fray, he is given birth” (Sahagún 1997:136).

The same was said in a song of the Mimixcoa, “Cloud Serpents,” the first mythical warriors who descended from Seven Caves and had to feed the Sun with their similarly named victims: “I came forth (was born), I came forth (was born) with my spear made of the prickly plant” (Sahagún 1958:94; Seler 1990–1998:vol. III:258). As Seler (1990–1998:vol. III:260) observes, the Nahuatl commentator explains that the verb *temo* (“to descend”) means *tlacati* (“to be born”) *ynotlavitol ynomiuh* (with “my bow and arrows”).

In the Mixtec *Códice Vindobonensis* (Anders et al. 1992b: Plate 49; Jansen 1982:90; Olivier 2021:60), the Lord 9 Wind (equivalent to Quetzalcoatl) is depicted as a child (characterized by his nakedness and his small size), receiving instructions from his two grandparents just before he leaves the sky (Anders et al. 1992b:92) (Figure 1). He emerges from a flint knife, attached to the latter by his umbilical cord (Figure 2), witnessing a connection between warfare and childbirth that will be discussed further on.

In Tlaxcala, the patron god of hunting, Camaxtli, was said to be of the size of “*tres estados de altura*.” Besides him, a small statue of a little god was honored, and it was said to have accompanied the Tlaxcalan people since the first inhabitants migrated and arrived there (Benavente 1971:78). The indication of the difference in size makes it clear that the small statue is an infant.

In colonial Nayarit, Mexico, the friar Antonio Tello (1968: book 2, vol. 1:pp. 34–35) tells us the story of a Child-god (“*Dios Piltzintli, que quiere decir: dios niño*”), who, just like

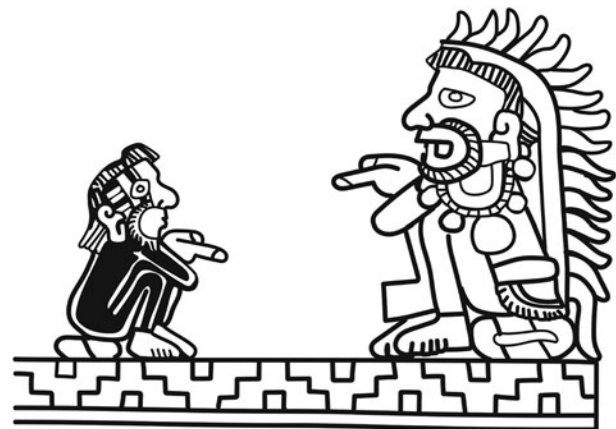


Figure 1. To the left, the God 9 Wind (equivalent to Quetzalcoatl) as a child, receiving instructions from a grandparent (Anders et al. 1992b:Plate 49). Illustration by Fátima Lázaro.



Figure 2. God 9 Wind emerges from a flint knife, attached by his umbilical cord (Anders et al. 1992b: Plate 49). Illustration by Fátima Lázaro.

the Mexica gods, left his foot- and handprint (“*dexó estampados los pies y manos, según la tradición de sus antepasados*”), and when needed, appeared “in the figure of a child” (“*en figura de un niño*”). In order to protect his people in times of warfare, he would appeal to legions of angels from the sky and “infernal demons” for military help: “asking for help, the god Piltzintli showed up with a bow, a shield and arrows invoking the gods of the Sky, asking them to send from their thrones legions of angels, and from hell, demons to help their faithful servants.”

More importantly, among contemporary indigenous West Mexican groups, *Piltonte*, which means “boy,” is another name for the young “Morning Star” hero of Mexicanero mythology (Neurath 2005:82). In Cora religion, he is a young Indigenous warrior “with bow and arrow, who intercedes with other gods to help the people in their troubles,” and during Cora ceremonies, he is personified as a little boy, as witnessed by Neurath. In songs, they talk about Piltonte’s descent to earth (Neurath 2005:80, 97). In the Huichol language, the gods of the Morning Star are either Xurawe Temai (“Young Star” or “Star Youth”), Tamatsi Parietsika (“Elder Brother of Dawn”), or Parikuta Muyeka (“The One Who Walks in the Dawn”) (Neurath 2005:81).

The frequent description of war gods as children, together with the association of the latter equipped with their weapons at birth, suggest an overarching theme. War gods and children do not spend their lives in the celestial realm but are “physically” present on Earth, as testified by their footprints. It is likely that both originate in the sky; abandon it as an infant and newborn, respectively; or in some cases, join a group of emigrants from some ancestral place of origin. At the same time, these gods had the capacity to be reborn again and again (Tena 2011:49).

Child warriors

I will present two examples of “becoming” children on the battlefield. The first tells how four warriors, after having lost in battle, transform into children—meaning, perhaps, that they become adopted sons of their captors. The second focuses on the sudden appearance of a *nagual* (or “nahuall”) baby of a warrior, and likewise ends up with a defeat (for “Nahualli,” see Andrews and Hassig in Ruiz de Alarcón 1984). According to Andrews, the word *nagual* literally means “an entity that can be interposed.” Following Martínez González (2011:88–90), *nahualli* could be understood here as an “accompanying entity” or “coessence”—human or non-human—that could be an ancestor, a protector, or a defender.

According to Alva Ixtlilxochitl (1985:vol. II:186), four esteemed warriors from the reign of Texcoco foresaw their coming defeat in a bad omen, which appeared to them shortly after the Mexica ruler Motecuhzoma betrayed his allied Texcocans by making a deal with the enemies from Tlaxcala. During the last night before the bellicose encounter, very near Eagle Hill, or “*Quauhtepetl*,” all four of them saw themselves in a dream, and it looked as though they were in their childhood, crying and hoping their mothers would come for them [...] and their hearts felt the harm that was so near at hand” (“*A un tiempo todos cuatro veían entre sueños, que parecía que estaban en la edad de su niñez, que andaban llorando tras de sus madres para que los recogiesen...y sus corazones conocían el daño que tan próximo se les venía*”) (Alva Ixtlilxochitl 1985:vol. II:186). (All translations from Spanish to English are the author’s.)

The *Anales de Tepeteopan* (2009:31), which refer to Tehuacan, Puebla, tells the story of Xochitecutli and his family, who all claimed to be eagles and jaguars, and how they competed with someone named Ozomatli de Tepexic Atezca. During an encounter between the two, “his [Ozomatli’s] *nahual* came falling at midnight and transformed as a child, with whom he would defeat Xochitecutli, eagle, jaguar” (“*a media noche llegó su nahual, vino a caer convertido en niño, con él iba a vencer a Xochitecutli, águila, ocelote*”). The child, lying there, was brought to Xochitecutli, who ordered that the infant be killed by shouting, “Hit him with a stick of magnolia” (“*ya péguenle con una vara de magnolia [yolloxochitl]*”) (*Anales de Tepeteopan* 2009:31), initiating the start of the battle: “And when they had not yet hit him with a stick in the head, a flower of magnolia burst out [causing a loud echo in the mountains] and warfare started there.” (“*Y cuando aún no le pegaban con palo en su cabeza, luego brotó una flor de magnolia, y allí se hizo Guerra*”) (*Anales de Tepeteopan* 2009:33). As Tenorio et alia (*Anales de Tepeteopan* 2009:27) explain, the opening of a flower—*cueponi* in nahuatl—refers to something that bursts out or radiates.

A major difference between human and *nagual* children and Child-god seems to be that the former are portrayed as victims, whereas the latter could also be the victors. Another ritual episode that possibly indicates that a prisoner of war was considered a child describes the presence of a woman with one breast bigger than the other one in

Mixcoatl's temple in Tlaxcala (Muñoz Camargo 1998:98–103). In the midst of battle, this woman magically produced breast milk to feed and strengthen the arrows as if they were children (Olivier 2015:118–122). Interestingly, a carrier of the skin of the first sacrificed captive was anointed with the same milk.

Song LVII of the *Cantares Mexicanos*: “cradlesong”

Although different in context, I make a comparative analysis here of two episodes: one on the battlefield, and the other in a ritual setting. Both include the presence of an infant in a cradle and the existence of a virtual kinship relation between two entities. In the former case, the infant is a Mexica *tlatoani*, whereas in the latter, the hero is a baby-stone knife.

Song LVII of the *Cantares Mexicanos* (CM) is called “cradlesong” and glorifies the Mexican ruler, “the little jewel, baby Ahuizotl” (Bierhorst 1985:263–267). A Mexican girl is carrying a “shield cradle” and is apparently looking for him: “for there beyond is where he lies, this treasure, this little war-flower babe of mine” (Bierhorst 1985:263–267). However, her intentions seem to be sexual: “My breasts are popcorn flowers. In bed with raven blooms we’ve been entwined. O, little young man. O little Ahuizotl” (Bierhorst 1985:263–267).

The next episode in the CM evokes the sound of the radiating flower that appeared in the *Anales de Tepetoeplan*: “I heard a song, me, a girl, I carry my younger brother, we will see little Ahuizotl; a flower tree emerged, a flower rope comes intertwined. Little Ahuizotl triggers his song” (“Escuché un canto, yo doncella, llevo a cuestras a mi hermano menor, veremos al pequeño Ahuizotl; vino a brotar el árbol florido, el cordel florido se viene entrelazando. Desata su canto el pequeño Ahuizotl”) (León-Portilla 2016:book II:vol. 1:chapter LVIII). The precious tree sprouts: “pequeño Ahuizotl, que te haga yo bailar, ha llegado el niño en flor” (León-Portilla 2016:book II:vol. 1:chapter LVIII). As Bierhorst (1985:267) renders it, “The dear little flower babe has arrived!” Then, Ahuizotl gets involved in a battle in Huexotzinco. She tells him not to cry (“I’ll lay you in your cradle, little Ahuizotl, your father will come, he will rock you”).

According to Bierhorst (1985:459), the Mexican girl seeks to please him by offering him enemy warriors, for this is what he craved. He is then captured by his “father” in Huexotzinco. Bierhorst (1985:459) positions a warrior opponent as Ahuizotl’s father. We can be sure of this interpretation given that we have more explicit comparable data in the *Florentine Codex*. The fact that a captive was turned into the child of his captor also implied a cannibalistic prohibition of the captor eating his own prisoner: “Shall I perchance eat my very self?” For when he took [the captive], he had said, “he is as my beloved son.” And the captive had said, “he is my beloved father.” (Sahagún 1950–1982:vol. II:54).

This process of incorporation and mutual identification was visually represented by the adoption, by the victors, of the enemy’s black eye-paint circle (indicating a merging of victor and vanquished) for which the victorious warrior received the name Cuixcocatl (or “hombre alcoholado,”

which refers to a balsam extract) (Acuña 1986:82–83). According to a Chichimec myth (*Anales de Cuauhtitlan* 2011:25), all the four hundred Mimixcoa (the first mythical warriors) painted their eyes with the ashes of the goddess Itzpapalotl (“Obsidian-Butterfly”) after she was burned. In the *Códice Borgia* (Anders et al. 1993a:110:Plate 15), Mixcoatl, the Chichimec patron god of hunting, holds a child in his right hand (both the god and the child wearing black eye paint) as an image of himself and a sign of warfare and as part of a series of calendar images related to birth (Figure 3).

Now why does the Mexican girl lay little Ahuizotl in a cradle, waiting to be captured by his enemy father? The Dominican friar Diego Durán gives us some hints in his description of the goddess Cihuacoatl (“Woman Snake”), a female warrior and at the same time an old woman (Graulich 1999:240–242). See also Gingerich (1988) and Klein (1988) for detailed descriptions of this goddess (Figure 4). This goddess, whose temple was dark and with a small entryway, was accustomed to being fed with sacrificial victims. But after having eaten a thigh, it was said that she would inform her priests that they could take the offering away because she was satisfied (Durán 1984:vol. I:130). At certain moments, however, she would crave for more, and it was during one of these moments that her priests decided to seek a cradle. A sacrificial knife was put in it, which received the name the “son of Cihuacoatl.” Then, a girl was sent to the market with the cradle, where it was abandoned. Afterward, it was said that the goddess had appeared at the market with her son. Upon hearing what had happened, the priests, who had been mourning the disappearance of the Knife-son, went to retrieve the cradle and, with much reverence, returned it to the temple.

This story is significant because we see here again a kinship construction, this time composed of mother and child (a knife), symbolized by a cradle. But why is her son personified as a sacrificial knife (usually made of stone), and why was it sent to the market in the first place? Here, I follow

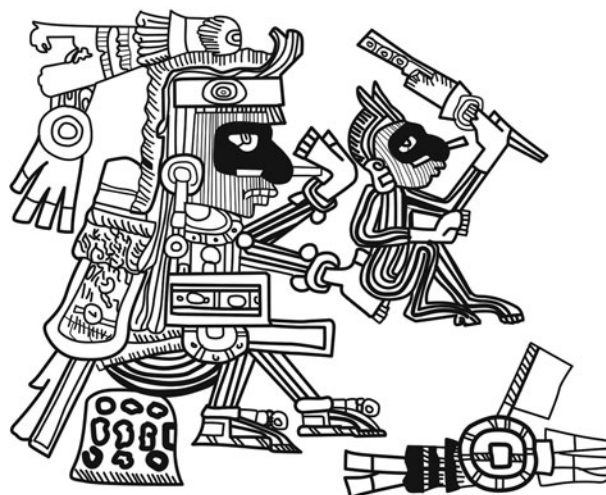


Figure 3. Mixcoatl holds a child in his right hand as an image of himself (Anders et al. 1993a:110, Plate 15). Illustration by Fátima Lázaro.



Figure 4. Cihuacoatl (“Woman-Snake”). (Anders and Jansen 1996:Plate 45r.) Note the two sacrificial knives in her headband and the weaving baton in her left hand. Illustration by Fátima Lázaro.

Kay Almere Read (1998:133), who symbolically links the market with the battlefield and the hunting grounds, all three being sites of production: “War, hunting and going to the market were equivalent acts because they all produced sustenance.” It is good to remember that when sacrificial victims were needed, the Aztec counselor Tlacaoel (Durán 1984:vol. II:232–235) would advise that the troops be ordered to go to the market in Tlaxcala—meaning to go the battlefield—accompanied by their war god Huitzilpochtli to look for prisoners.

Hungry Old Mothers and hungry Baby-Knives

It would therefore appear that the rather strange act of sending her Knife-son to the market expressed the goddess’s need for child victims in the form of warriors, and occasionally as human children. According to Sahagún (2002:vol. II:28), in the period during which Don Martín Ecatl governed in Tlatelolco, the goddess Cihuacoatl (called a “Devil” by Sahagún) would appear day and night, and that on one occasion, she ate a child from a cradle in the town of Azcaputzalco: “y en tiempo deste, el Diablo, que en figura de mujer andaba y aparecía de día y de noche, y se llamaba Cihuacóatl, comió un niño que estaba en la cuna en el pueblo de Azcaputzalco.” In the *Florentine Codex* (Sahagún 1950–1982: vol. I:11), she is called *Cioacoatl tequanj*, “Woman-Snake Eater of Man.”

In the first half of the twentieth century, the German ethnographer Konrad T. Preuss documented various myths or tales in Nahuatl of the Sierra Madre Occidental. In some of these tales, an Old Mother god known as *Tepusilam* preys on children who are left unguarded in

order to feed her appetite for child flesh: “When the parents came back, the child was not there anymore. There was only an impression left” (“*Cuando los padres volvían, el niño ya no estaba. Sólo se veía una huella.*”) (Preuss 1982:97).

On the other hand, the fact that the goddess Cihuacoatl sends her own son (the Knife-son) to the market introduces some ambiguity. It could mean she “delivers” or abandons her child for warfare so that he can be captured and incorporated into the captor’s community. Or by conversely, with his craving mother waiting, is the Knife-son at the market a guarantee for getting her a prisoner? The idea of a child as an animal of prey (and by extension, a warrior) was documented by Torquemada (1975–1983:vol. I:259), and inevitably, it reminds us of the Olmec were-jaguar baby: “It was said of Nezahualpilli [ruler of Texcoco (1464–1515)] that when he was a child, his householders saw him lying in his cradle transformed as different animals; sometimes he appeared as a lion, other times as a tiger or as an eagle flying” (“*de su niñez se dice que criándolo sus amas le veían en la cuna en diferentes figuras de animales; unas veces les parecía león, otras tigre y otras águila que volaba*”).

Another relevant association between the mother goddesses and our sacrificial knife has to do with a temple of “Our Grandmother” Toci, likely located in a place called Tocititlan. In the *Codex Fejérváry-Mayer* (Anders et al. 1994:32), as part of the embellishments that adorn a series of six temples, she sits naked on a platform, with spindles in her headband, surrounded by a wooden framework and two tangled snakes. In the *Codex Vaticanus B* (Anders et al. 1993b:11), however, in a representation of the same six temples, as pointed out by Mazzetto (2014:208), a red-and-white horizontal sacrificial knife on top of an altar seems to devour a naked human being-like figure (Figure 5a–b). In a recent study, Chinchilla Mazariegos (2022:314) expounds the idea of “feeding” the sacrificial blades in Classic and Postclassic Maya war-related phrases, as referenced in the *Kaqchikel Chronicles* (2006:17): “This is your burden; this you must nourish, you must sustain. It is called the Blade Stone.”

What is most striking is that the goddess’s Knife-son exists as both the sacrificial victim and the one who carries out the predatory sacrifice simultaneously, which corresponds to the double destiny of a warrior. What we see is a cosmophagic world where humans and nonhumans can be substitutes for each other. Knife-sons, Warrior-sons, and children can be prey as well as victims (for the relationship between the knife and the warrior, see also Mikulska Dabrowska 2010: 129, 130). In the temple of the Old Mother, we see a sacrificial knife devouring a being. Blade Stones are also nourished. In another sense, it must be remembered that some gods of death and the earth show protruding tongues associated with food sacrifice. This attribute appears to be intentionally ambiguous, because it is never known whether the mouth swallows the knife or whether the knife serves as a tongue for feeding.

Cradles, hunting nets, and sacrificial knives

Other sources also depict flint knives as captured victims, or with divine power (in warfare): when Itzpapalotl or

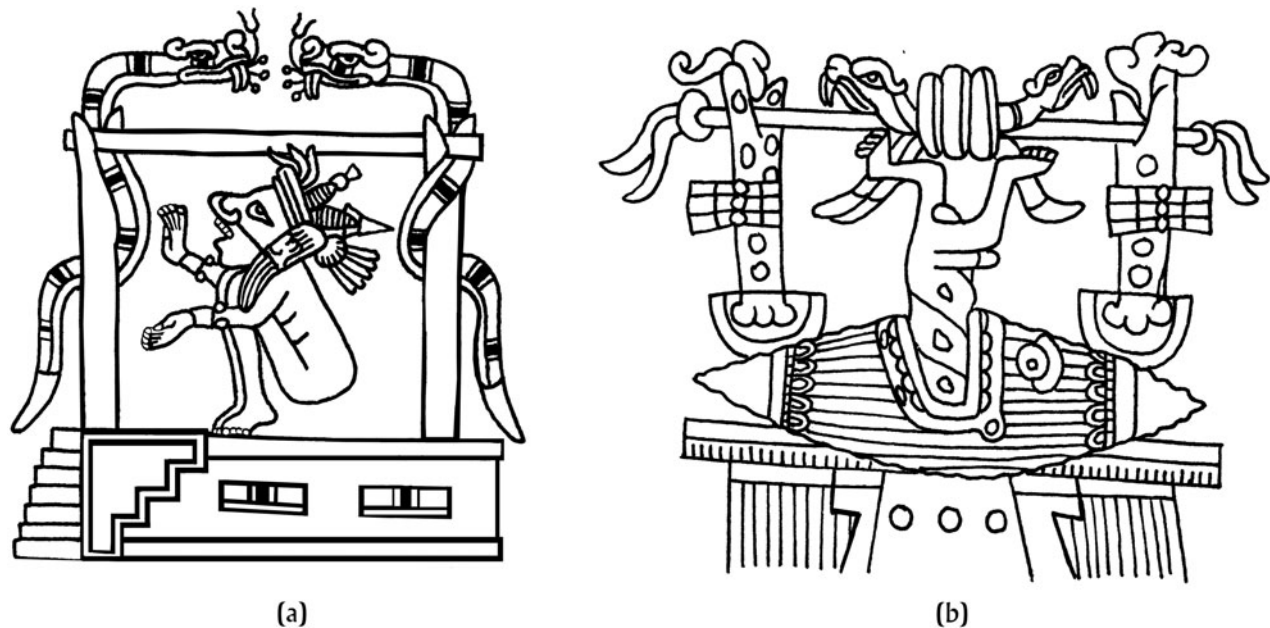


Figure 5. Temple of (a) “Our Grandmother” Toci (Anders et al. 1994:32); (b) a sacrificial knife devours a human being-like figure (Anders et al. 1993b:11) Illustration by Elena Mazzetto (2014).

“Obsidian-Butterfly,” a war and earth goddess, was burned, several knives appeared in the ashes. From these, Mixcoatl took a white flint knife, and with this secret weapon kept in a sacred bundle, he achieved success in warfare (*Leyenda de los soles* 2011:189; Olivier 2007:289, 293). In a cosmogonic myth from the Puebla-Tlaxcala region, the goddess Citlalicue, “Skirt of Stars,” gives birth to a flint knife (“*parió un navajón o pedernal*”). (Mendieta 2002:vol. I:181). Curiously, this knife was abandoned by her other children and thrown down to earth, right into the “Seven Caves,” which resulted in the appearance of 1,600 gods.

The flint knives falling from the sky are a reference to—or at least an equivalent of—the first mythical warriors, the Mimixcoa, who, in their fall from the sky, landed near some mezquites and bisnagas, and who would become the first sacrificial victims of the Aztecs (Alvarado Tezozómoc 1992:23, 25) (Figure 6).

Because of this brave warrior act (the capturing of the Mimixcoa), the Aztecs changed their name to Mexicas, in reference to their merit as warriors, and an eagle gave them bows and arrows and a hunting net so they could shoot what they saw in the sky. In the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca* (1976:20r), a similar hunting net with two red-and-white sacrificial knives in it is depicted, the latter of which could represent prey or sacrificial victims (Figures 7 and 8). In addition to the net, two Chichimec warriors are depicted lying in a mesquite tree (as if they came falling from the sky), being “imbued” with warfare by an eagle and a jaguar (Figure 9). Interestingly, two red-and-white stone knives that adorn the front of his head-dress are an essential iconographic feature of the Morning Star in Late Postclassic highland central Mexican art

(Mathiowetz et al. 2015:9); these stone knives are also seen in a depiction of the goddess Cihuacoatl (See Figure 4).

An interesting parallel can be drawn here with the idea of the Seven Caves as the place where newborn warriors appear and are discovered (Figure 10). To reinforce this idea, it is relevant to recall once again the hymn of the Mimixcoa and the Nahuatl commentator, who describes the descent of these divine warriors: “I came down, I was born in my netted pouch (equipped with it) directly in it (equipped with it) was I born (Seler 1990–1998:vol. III:258). In the myth of the origin of Sacred Warfare to feed the Sun and Earth, four hundred Mimixcoa threatened their five enemy brothers, but the latter had already left the



Figure 6. Mimixcoa or mythical warrior on top of a biznaga cactus (Códice Boturini [*Tira de la peregrinación*] 2015). Illustration by Fátima Lázaro.

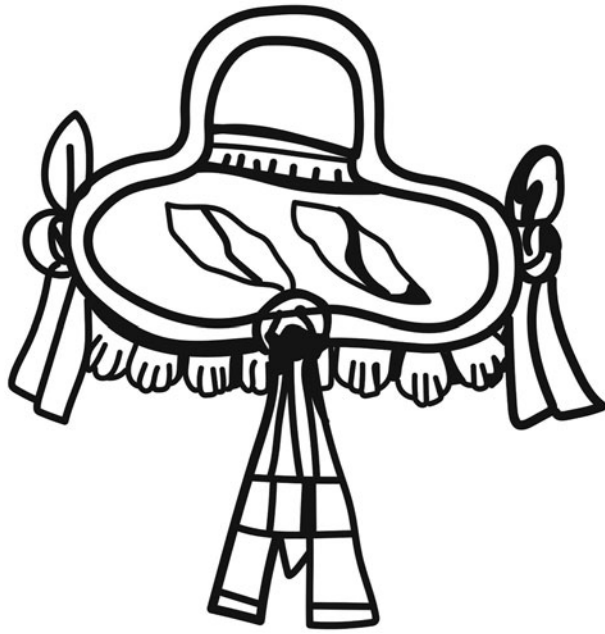


Figure 7. Detail from plate 20r. A hunting net with two sacrificial knives in it, as if they were prey (Kirchhoff et al. 1976:20r). Illustration by Fátima Lázaro.

mesquites and the netted pouches (“*huacales de red*”) (*Leyenda de los soles* 2011:187). As observed by Olivier (2007:298, 300), the *Mapa de Cuauhtinchan No.2* shows some vegetation with hunting nets (“*matlahuacal*”) in it, just beneath the Seven Caves, establishing a connection between warriors and prey.]

Based on the sources cited above, there seems to be strong evidence that a netted pouch can be understood as the symbolic equivalent of a cradle. Effectively, as Chimalpain Cuauhtlehuanitzin (1997:67) relates, the son of Quinatzin was the first child to be raised in a cradle, given that the Chichimecs of Texcoco traditionally used a net.

Another mythological figure worth mentioning is Copil, the son of Huitzilopochtli’s sister Malinalxoch. Looking to avenge his mother after his uncle abandoned her, Copil transformed himself into a sacrificial knife, Itztapaltetl, at a place called Itztapaltemoc, “Itztapal who descends [who is born]” (Alvarado Tezozómoc 1992:41). Itztapaltetl can be considered a variation of the god-knife Itztapaltotec, a personification of dead warriors who would descend to fertilize the earth every year (Graulich 2000:110). In the *Códice Tonalamatl de Aubin* (Brito Guadarrama 2018:Plate 20), Itztapaltotec is depicted with two red-and-white sacrificial knives in his hands (as if multiplying himself?) before the Old Fire god (Figure 11).

Chipping and flaking new creatures

In the *Codex Borgia* (1963:32), in the House of Knives (“*Itzcalli*”) (Seler in *Códice Borgia* 1963:32), we witness the sacrifice of a central figure, “*Cuchillo de Pedernal*” (“*Flint Knife*”) (Anders et al. in *Códice Borgia* 1993a:200): “and two facing flint knives replace its severed head. [...] From the

mouths of flint knives that appear along the figure’s arms and legs emerge five nude males. [...] This flint-lines precinct could be an Aztec version of an underworld layer” (Hill Boone 2007:183–185) (Figure 12). Pohl (1998:188) describes the central figure as a “giant decapitated stellar demon, either Itzpapalotl or Citlalicue” (the two goddesses mentioned above). According to Mikulska Dabrowska (2010: 131), the flint knife metonymically replaces all the elements that refer to the creative.

According to Neurath (2020:127–128), this scene could depict the production of flakes from a core (and in my judgment, has to be considered complementary to other interpretations). In this sense, the *Florentine Codex* gives us an essential clue. When discussing the birth of newborns, it describes them as being “chipped” or “flaked off” from their ancestors: “the creation of our lord arrived; it appeared on earth. The precious necklace, the precious feather. [...] the chip, the flake of those who already have gone to reside in the beyond, the old men, the old women” (Sahagún 1950–1982:vol. VI:180–181). Mikulska Dabrowska (2010: 141) observes that, although at a speculative level, in the *Codex Nuttall* (9) a woman is depicted with a flint knife in her lap.

In a recent study on geological symbolism of the Toltec period, Kristan-Graham (2020:318, 319) argues that sculpted pillars and reliefs from Tula represented ancestors. At the same time, she reminds us of the typical haircut of the bravest Mexica warriors, the *temillo* (“pillar of stone”), as depicted in several images of the *Codex Mendoza* (Figure 13). In the *Florentine Codex* (Sahagún 1950–1982:vol. X:23), a brave man is said to be like a stone pillar.

It is instructive to consider the “birth” of obsidian stone as portrayed in the *Kaqchikel* (or *Xajil*) *Chronicles* (2006:8): “Then the Obsidian Stone is birthed by Raxa Xib’alb’ay [and] Q’ana Xib’alb’ay.” Immediately, humanity was created as sustenance for the Obsidian Stone, which is understood as Blade Stone (Chinchilla Mazariegos 2022:314). The same source mentions a humanized “stone” group or materialized human beings, or, as Houston (2014: 27) declares, “their identities entwine so closely with other matter as to merge with it.” A group of warriors, the seven *amaq’s*, declared themselves to be the Obsidian people: “These are our identities here: we, those of obsidian; we, those of rope; we, the displayers of our burden” (*Kaqchikel Chronicles* 2006:44). Ambiguously, they bedeck themselves with feather down and white clay, symbols of sacrificial victims.

In the *Códice Nuttall* (Anders et al. 1992a:Plates 4, 21), three armed persons, painted as sacrificial victims, descend from heaven as allies of the People of Stone, and are then captured (Jansen 1982:346) (Figure 14). In plate 21, the striped person is clearly of smaller size than his captive, indicating he could be a child, whereas in a similar scene in plate 4, prisoners and captives are the same size.

The child hero and the Old Adoptive Mother

The birth of child warriors should also be situated as part of a major mythological theme—namely, that of the child hero

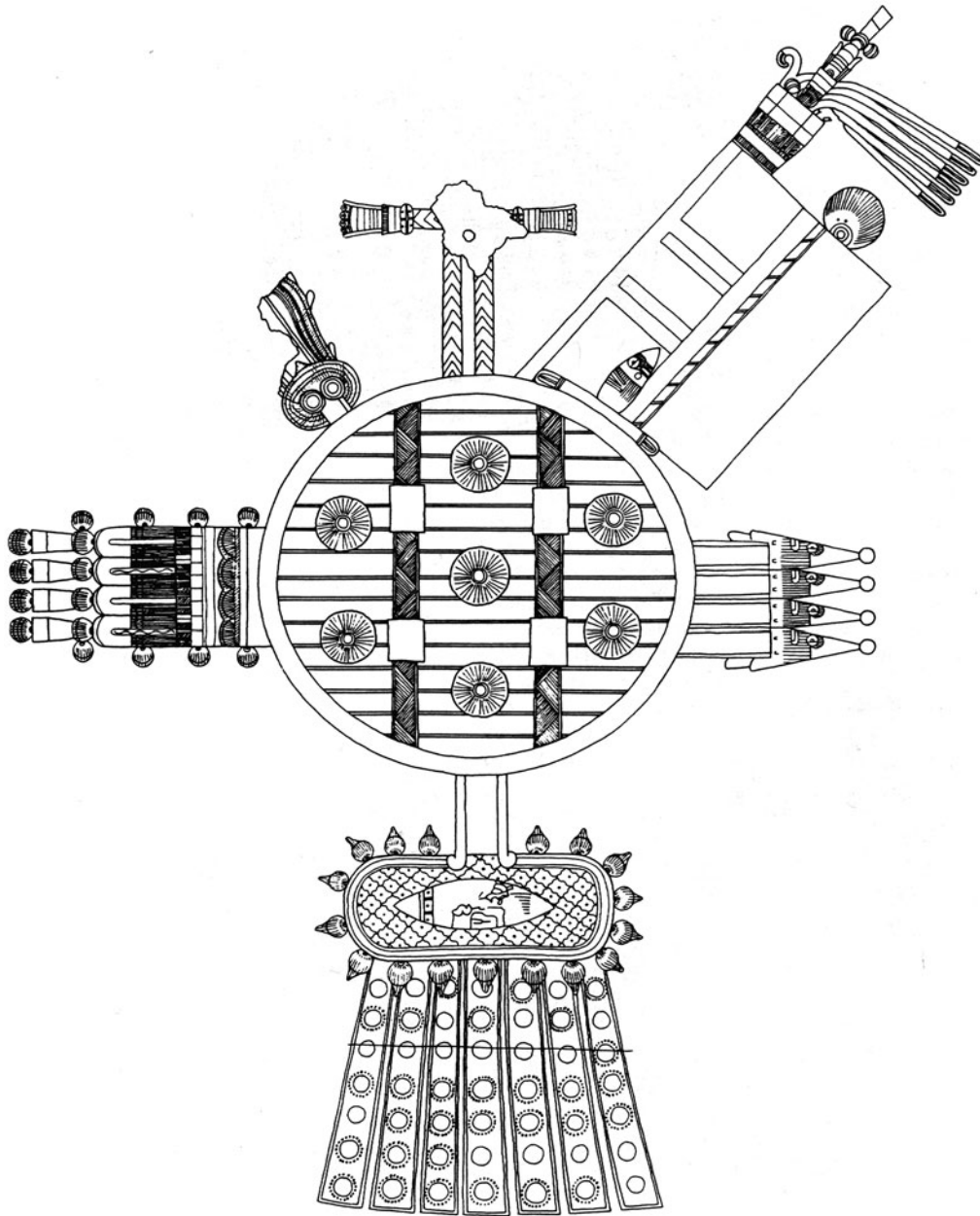


Figure 8. Note the sacrificial knife in the hunting net, as if it was prey. Shield with iconography related to Mixcoatl and Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli (Tehuacan, Puebla, Postclassic period) (Olivier 2015. Modified from Sisson and Lilly 1994. Illustration by Elbis Domínguez.

and the Old Adoptive Mother (“the Old Female Earth”). According to Braakhuis (2010:42), the Old Adoptive Mother plays a crucial role in a wide range of transformations related to nourishment, all of which are related to processes such as adoption, midwifery, sex, cannibalism, hunting, and warfare.

In the *Leyenda de los soles* (2011:191), we learn that the goddess “Woman Snake,” or Cihuacoatl, was the adoptive mother of Ceácatl or Quetzalcoatl, whose mother had died while giving birth. This child, who appears interchangeably as the Sun, Huitzilopochtli, Santiaguito, Christ, Knife-son, Morning Star, *piltontle* (“a small child”), among others, should be considered a foundling (abandoned in the market

or on the battlefield), rejected by his consanguineal family. He is among “those no longer with mothers, those no longer with fathers, the orphaned” (*Florentine Codex*, Sahagún 1950–1982, VI:84).

Nonetheless, the Old Adoptive Mother plans on eating the child (or, as Braakhuis [2010:49] puts it, a “divine envy of maternal fertility”). As a primeval being, she lives off of her own offspring (Braakhuis 2010:45). However, by being burned by fire or boiled in a steam bath, she becomes the goddess of midwifery (Báez-Jorge 2008:161; Braakhuis 2010:41; Olivier 2009). A *temazcal* (“steam bath”) was considered a womb of the earth, or the equivalent of a volcano—a place where water and fire produce hot steam (in the *Kaqchikel Chronicles*

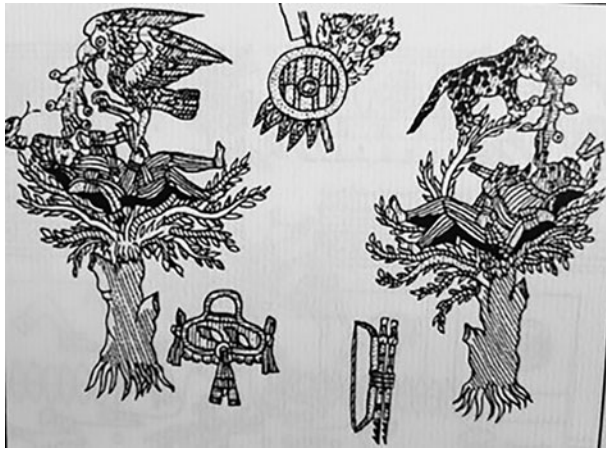


Figure 9. Two Chichimecs lying in a mesquite tree, as if they were falling from the sky, are “fed” (“inspired”) with warfare by an eagle and a jaguar (Kirchhoff et al. 1976:20r). Illustration by Fátima Lázaro.

[2006:76], the bravest warrior and hero, Q’aq’awitz, climbs into a volcano and “captures” the fire as a flint).

Braakhuis (2010:102) explains that “entering and becoming one with the womb of the steam bath implies the realization of Old Adoptive Mother’s most ardent desire: She becomes a sort of mother, not by appropriating the children



Figure 10. A net placed in the top of a tree to capture newborn warriors, just beneath Seven Caves (Carrasco and Sessions 2007). Illustration by Fátima Lázaro.

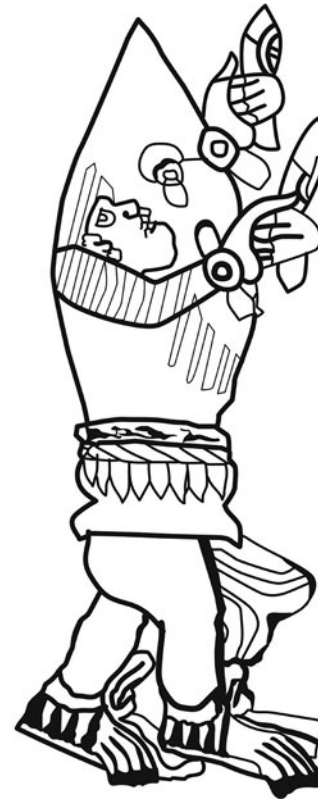


Figure 11. Itztpaltec with two sacrificial knives in his hands, perhaps as if he were multiplying himself (Brito Guadarrama 2018:Plate 20). Illustration by Fátima Lázaro.

engendered by others, but by bearing and delivering them herself. In terms of the cannibalistic kitchen, she is now no longer obliged to eat her children to get pregnant.”

In the *Florentine Codex* (Sahagún 1950–1981:vol. VI:153), “Grandmother of the Bath” is called Teteo Innan or Yoalticitl, “Mother of the Gods or Midwife of Darkness,” evoking her precosmological origin. As Gingerich (1988:225–226) notes, after the child had been put in the cradle, the midwife addressed the cradle as if it were

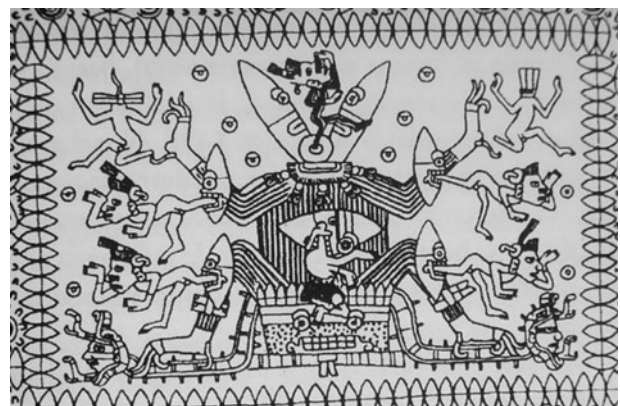


Figure 12. Fragment of *Códice Borgia* (Anders et al. 1993a:32). The birth of the war god Tezcatlipoca, warriors, and Quetzalcoatl, in a flint-lines precinct (Hill Boone 2007). Illustration by Fátima Lázaro.



Figure 13. Hairstyle of the bravest Mexica warriors, the *temillotl* (“pillar of stone”) (*Codex Mendoza* 62r. Illustration by Kristan-Graham (2020:318).

Yoalticitl: “Old Woman, do not do anything to the baby; be gentle with it.”

That Mother Earth’s children were made of stone was probably a way to avoid the fact that she would eat them, as is reflected in some contemporary tales in which she breaks her fangs after biting an old stone statue (an archaeological piece considered an ancestor) instead of a human victim (Braakhuis 2010:45, 66; Navarrete 1966:424). The existence of the “son of Cihuacoatl,” made of stone and left as a foundling in a cradle at the market, seems to implicate a pact with human beings: knife sons for human sons—something she could eat without breaking her teeth.

The umbilical cord

Another dimension of the relationships between childbirth, warfare, and blade stones emerges from the sacrifice of the Mother Goddess Toci during the festival month of Ochpaniztli. As part of the ceremony, the ancient Nahuas deposited different parts of the human body—such as hearts, skins, umbilical cords, and possibly placentas—in border areas with the enemy. I observed earlier (Declercq 2022, 2025) that relationships between different groups were characterized by an “exchange” of body parts or organs, either abandoned or purposefully left as an offering in frontier zones. These body parts were much wanted by

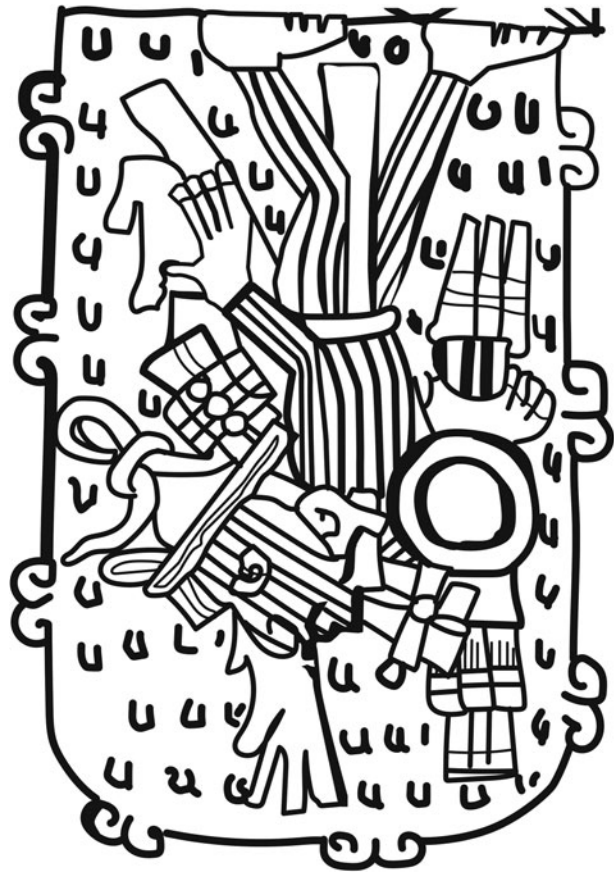


Figure 14. An armed person, painted as a sacrificial victim, descends from heaven (Anders et al. 1992a:Plate 21), with clay or “darkness” (Jansen 1982:346). Illustration by Fátima Lázaro.

enemies (Gómez de Orozco 1945:48, f.348r.). Obtaining male umbilical cords and thigh skin (probably a euphemism for placenta, see Declercq 2022) from the enemy could have had regenerative functions.

Sahagún and his informants (1950–1982) give us an intriguing insight on such relational dynamics between groups in a description of a ritual of childbirth. After a child had been given a name (usually of an ancestor), some youths were assembled who apparently represented the enemy: “Then they took up the umbilical cord offering of the baby; they snatched it and ran; they went off eating it [...] they went shouting out that which was his name. If his name were Yaotl, they went saying to him: ‘O Yaotl, o Yaotl, know the interior of the plains [...] the battlefield.’ [...] And they came saying: ‘O valiant warriors, come, eat the umbilical cord offering of Yaotl.’” These young men represented those who had died in war, “because they robbed the umbilical cord offering of the baby” (Sahagún 1950–1982: vol. VI:204). Given that Yaotl means “enemy” (Olivier 2014–2015:67), it looks as though these young men imitated the enemy stealing the umbilical cord at the frontier zone. It symbolized the taking of a child captive and maybe the cannibalizing of the victim. At the same time, it seems to express a desire to make a cosmic connection with the “other,” or an act of identification with the enemy. As

Alfred Métraux (2011:11) stated, being captured by the enemy implied a rupture with the “old” community and a process of incorporation in a new “home.”

When a prisoner was about to be sacrificed on top of a round stone (“*temalácatl*”), he was tied to this monolith with a rope of sustenance (“*tonacamécatl*”), which could have symbolized an umbilical cord (Graulich 1999:312), to express his new kinship ties. Vail and Hernández (2008:123, 124) have argued that the rope motif of captives in some Maya iconography might relate to cosmic creation and the idea of a cosmic umbilical cord.

Some final notes

When the son of Tezozomoc, Cuacuauhpietzahuac, was made *tlatoani* of the Mexicas, the first town he conquered was Chimalhuacan. After this was successfully achieved, a song was intoned: “The child that has been put in his cradle laughs without a doubt to [his father] Tezozomoc; now there goes Cuacuauhpietzahuac” (“*El niño que fue puesto en la cuna sonrió sin duda a [su padre] Tezozomoc; ahora ya va por allí Cuacuauhpietzahuac*”) (*Anales de Tlatelolco* 2004:83). We are presented with a (quite contented) baby-warrior here.

In the present discussion, I have focused on the relationship between childbirth and warfare. The essential aspect of children (human and otherwise) is that they all come from the outside, whether they are biological or socially reproduced. At the same time, they can be sent from the sky or be found beneath the face of the earth in materialized form. From the womb of the earth, which is very much a stony essence, they are chipped and flaked from the ancestor’s bodies. In hunting nets, they come falling from the sky to land in the mezquites beneath Seven Caves or on the battlefield. In all cases, they are the Other. They all seem to have a predatory aspect: children in cradles or sacrificial knives in a netted pouch behave like animals or symbolize prey.

War prisoners (or warrior *nahualli*) that are considered children expect their fathers (the enemy warrior) or mothers (Old Adoptive Mother) to come for them, but end up sacrificed and consumed. Knife-sons are sent to the market—a euphemism for the battlefield—in order to find food. Humanity serves as sustenance for stonelike essences.

During war-related ceremonies, the ancient nahuas deposited different parts of the human body in the border areas with the enemy—such as hearts, skins, umbilical cords, and possibly placentas—with regenerative functions in order to reproduce new “children” to maintain a flower war that was never meant to end. Under such a predatory dynamic, they are “vital enemies” within a “political economy based on the widespread notion that vital energy is finite, generally fixed, scarce, unequally distributed, and in constant circulation” (Santos-Granero 2009:14).

Given the relationships between stone knives, babies, and warriors, the presence of blade stones equipped with miniature armament in various offerings of the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan (Aguirre Molina 2021) might be manifestations of “reborn” armed warriors and deities. They might be the

baby warriors evoked here. Future research into these relationships might offer new insights into Mexica offerings.

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