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The Human Body in the Mexica Worldview

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Abstract and Keywords

For the ancient Mexicas, the composition of the human body was similar to that of the cosmos, with both being composed of dense and light substances. The light substance of the human body was divine in nature and formed the different souls of each human being. Some souls were indispensable for human existence while others were unnecessary and often harmful. The dense part of the human body functioned through its union with the souls. Like the different souls, the dense parts of the human body also had specific functions dedicated to different activities. For example, human thought derived primarily from the heart. Souls could be damaged, which could cause them to malfunction and lead to illness and possibly death in the human being. As the souls were divine, each was a conscious being with its own personality; thus there could be disagreements between them. Disharmony could also lead to illness.

Keywords: human body, Mexica worldview, Mexicas, different souls, illness, disharmony, divine

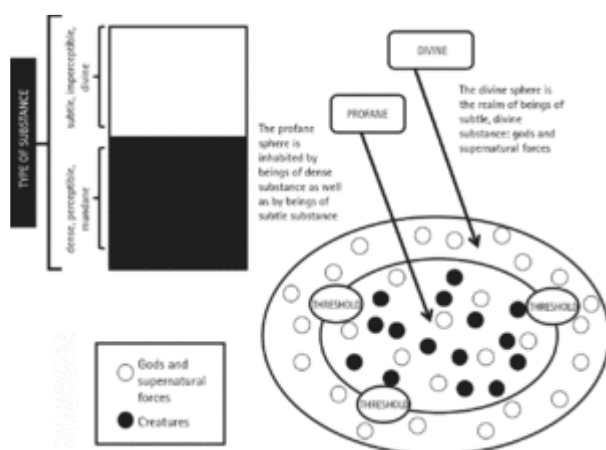
The Two Mexica Cities

ACCORDING to Mexica sources, a group set out from Aztlan¹ in the early twelfth century A.D. under the tutelage of their patron god in search of their promised land. Once they started their journey, their god instructed his chosen people, the *Aztec*, to hereafter refer to themselves as *Mexitin*, which would later become *Mexica*. In A.D. 1325, after traveling for more than two centuries, the pilgrims arrived at the site chosen by their god, where they founded Mexico-Tenochtitlan. A few short years later, a dissenting group established itself nearby, founding the sister city of Mexico-Tlatelolco. At the time of the Spanish Conquest, Mexico-Tenochtitlan was the most powerful city in Mesoamerica. Thus the European campaign focused on gaining control of the capital, a goal they achieved in

1521. This chapter is based primarily on historical sources written by authors in both cities. The texts offer a glimpse of indigenous traditions from the eve of the Conquest through the first decades of the Colonial period.

The Mexica understanding of the human body is similar to ideas held by other Mesoamerican peoples of the era. The former are often used as a prototype, largely because the ancient and early Colonial sources, both in Nahuatl and in Spanish, tend to focus on them. Mexica ideas were rooted in contemporary cultural traditions; thus sources referencing synchronous groups can be used as supplemental information. In addition, and with appropriate caution, some ethnographic data may also be used to complement our understanding, offering important details on the indigenous ideas and practices that survived the long process of colonization.

Research on ideas about the constitution and functioning of the human body as conceptualized by a given group of people should focus on the social, economic, political, and religious setting of the time. Thus such research may explore both how the cultural (p. 400) context affects people's perceptions of themselves and how concepts of the body guide all human activities.



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Figure 27.1 The cosmos is divided into two time-space realms. The divine is the realm of the gods and supernatural forces and is composed of subtle substance. The profane realm is inhabited by beings (composed of dense substance) as well as the gods and supernatural forces. Thresholds between the realms permit communication.

Drawn by author and Kristin Sullivan.

The most important sixteenth-century Mexica documents regarding the body include Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's (2000) *General History* and Fray Alonso de Molina's (1944 [1571]) impressive dictionary. Other authors have also offered important information, permitting us to assemble a coherent picture of these complex concepts (López Austin 1988).

The Composition of the Human Body

One of the central precepts of both ancient and contemporary indigenous worldviews is that all creatures are composed of two types of substances. The first is heavy, dense, visible, and subject to the ravages of time. The other is light, subtle, and undetectable (Figure 27.1). The heavy part of the human body also contains a set of light substance entities that approximate our modern concept of “souls,” taking appropriate precautions not to blindly equate the two. Within each individual reside several such entities, each (p. 401) with different, and often complementary, characteristics. The heterogeneity of these souls lies partly in the diversity of their origin. They are also unique in how they enter or leave the body, the dangers to which they are exposed, and the degree of comfort or discomfort they may cause to humans. In particular, their specific functions set them apart in terms of what we today conceptualize as physiological, psychological, moral, social, parental, religious, and so on. Importantly, these souls possess free will. Thus we must consider the harmony or cacophony of the whole, as the individual’s health depends, in part, on maintaining good relations between the various components of the body.

The Heavy Substance of the Human Body

The heavy and dense part of the body deteriorates and is eventually destroyed in this life by the effects of time and wear. This part of the body is sustained by the bounty of the earth, and each individual’s destiny is to settle his or her debt, offering his or her body to the earth goddess. Thus the heavy substance of the body returns to the earth. This idea, in particular, exemplifies a religion that revolved around intense reciprocity between men and gods.

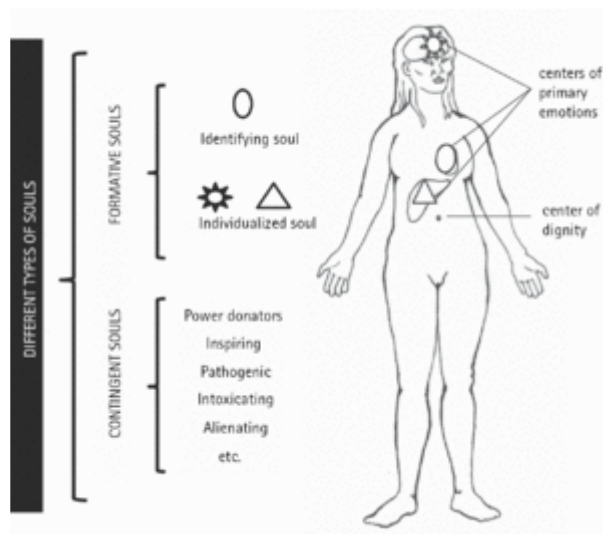
The body’s fuel, par excellence, was corn. To obtain the grain, specifically chosen by the gods to form and later sustain their human creations, the gods had to break the stone enclosure that prevented the corn from leaving the divine sphere in order to come into contact with the surface of the earth (“Leyenda de los soles” 1945:21).

The soft part of the body was metaphorically referred to as “the earthen or muddy” part and included adipose tissue, striated muscles, skin, organs, hair, and semen, all covering the bones. The various components were linked at the joints, weak points that could be penetrated by the invisible agents visiting the body in order to cause harm. Usually, the invaders were cold beings generically referred to as “airs.”

The nerves, ligaments, and tendons bound the various bodily components, concentrating the vital forces in them. Blood vessels were distributed uniformly throughout the body, preventing the liquid's retention in any one place; while lubricating the muscles, strengthening, revitalizing, and allowing them to grow. Any change in the blood's density was considered very negative.

The head was the center of all major psychological functions, coordinating organs like the eyes and ears, which were attributed the powers of both perception and reasoning.

The viscera formed an interconnected web through which fluids circulated freely. Some of its functions, such as digestion or respiration, were conceived of as generating heat, which materialized as waste or steam. Food was cleansed and purified as it descended into the heat of the stomach and spleen. The heart was the vital center and the organ of consciousness; the liver was a reservoir for blood, while the gall bladder housed anger. Both the kidneys and the testes generated sexual joy. Semen was produced in the (p. 402) bone marrow, and procreation required that the father's semen mix with an equivalent fluid donated by the mother.



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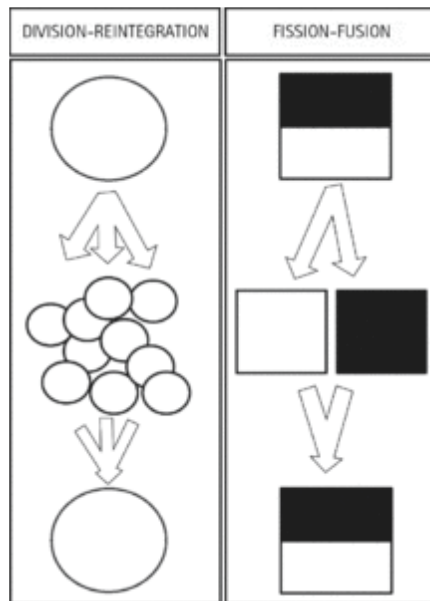
Figure 27.2 The body is composed of dense and subtle substance. The different souls are composed of subtle substance. Formative souls are necessary for human existence. In contrast, humans can survive without the different contingent souls.

Prepared by author and redrawn by Kristin Sullivan.

Souls

Souls can be roughly divided into organic entities making up the human body and those that, being contingent, invade the body to transform, sicken, alter the consciousness, inspire positive or negative passion, or grant extraordinary powers (Figure 27.2). The former are integrated into the body before birth or soon thereafter and perform their duties from the shelter of the heavy and dense part of the body, though remaining distinct thanks to their supernatural origin. In the Mesoamerican worldview, *supernatural* refers to all that is imperceptible, having originated before the creation of the world, acting on the everyday with results that can be perceived by humans. Some souls also have a personality, allowing them to achieve divine status.

To understand the supernatural quality of the Mexica soul and its place in the human body, one must first understand that within the Mexica worldview the supernatural (p. 403) substance was divisible, and its constituent parts could disperse throughout the world and later return to their point of origin (Figure 27.3). Moreover, souls could, and often did, enter different bodies. Thus an entity deriving from a god or creature could be shared by several individuals or might invade other beings on either a temporary or permanent basis.



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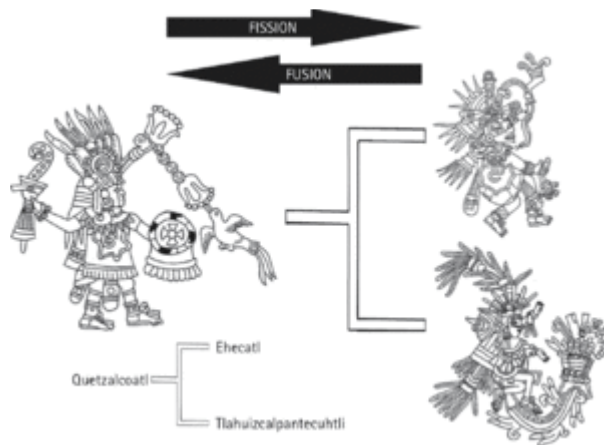
Figure 27.3 Each god can separate into two or more different gods, and two or more different gods can join together to form a single god. These two processes are known as fission and fusion. The gods can also separate into multiple gods, which can join together again. These two processes are known as division and reintegration.

Prepared by author and redrawn by Kristin Sullivan.

Thus, for the Mexica, the human body was not a simple amalgamation of heterogeneous elements. These elements were not exclusive to any one body; rather, they could be shared with other beings, both supernatural and earthly. It was also a dynamic system, constantly transformed by time and permanently or temporarily possessed by invasive souls.

The *Teyolía*

For the Mexicas, all creatures had a unique soul known as the “heart.” Not to be confused with the organ of the same name that formed part of the heavy substance of the body, this soul was of divine origin. Originally, many gods transformed themselves in order to create the world. Covering themselves in a detectable layer made of a dense and heavy (p. 404) substance, the gods became creators-beings, maintaining their divine immortality within their light substance but entering the cycle of life/death via the heavy substance now covering them. When the heavy substance layer died or was destroyed, the exposed souls were stored inside the hollow Sacred Mountain, where they were prepared to be recycled and sent to form another being of the same class or species. Within these souls lie the essential characteristics of the different classes of the earthly entities: stars, elements, meteors, minerals, plants, animals, and humans.



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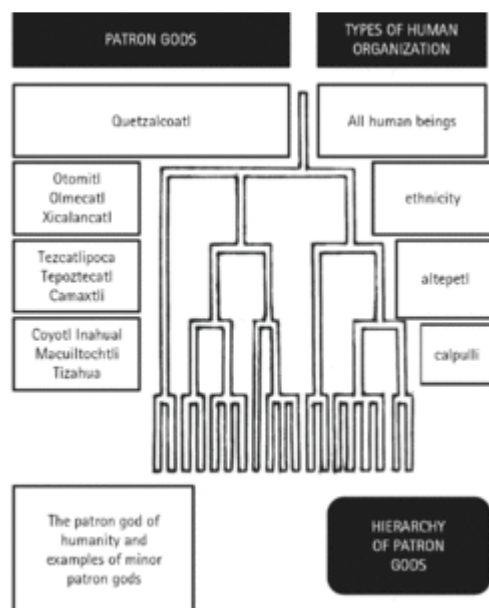
Figure 27.4 The god Quetzalcoatl can fission to form two different gods: Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli and Ehecatl. Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli and Ehecatl can fuse together to form the god Quetzalcoatl.

Prepared by author and redrawn by Kristin Sullivan.

The *teyolía*, the center of the light substance in humans, resided in the perceptible organ known as the heart, or *yóllotl*. It joined the child before birth and remained with the individual until his or her death. The *teyolía* was composed of the essential characteristics of human beings. However, within the complexity humans attributed themselves, the heart was conceived of as being composed of divine levels. Mesoamerican

deities could fission, or split into heterogeneous components, so that the same god could be transformed into multiple gods (Figure 27.4).

Thus each human heart possessed the characteristic features that the patron god, or one of the god's component parts, had contributed when donating its own substance during creation (López Austin 1997:36–39). The patron god of all humanity endowed humans with an anthropomorphic essence; all of the gods that successively split from the original god possessed the latter's essential characteristics: ethnicity, town, *calpulli* group, or larger familial group, and so on in descending order (Figure 27.5). Thus humans considered essential their anthropomorphic qualities, such as their language, (p. 405) customs, and economic specialization. The human being belonged, by participating in the collective *teyolía*, to different groups of varying sizes.



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Figure 27.5 Patron gods belong to distinct hierarchies, presiding over the different *calpullis*, cities, ethnicities, and of all humankind.

Prepared by author and redrawn by Kristin Sullivan.

The main functions of the *teyolía* were to provide life to the body and serve as the center of thought and emotional well-being for the individual, coordinating the activities of the other components. The greatest threats were illness or madness stemming from the individual's immoral behavior.

The *Tonalli*

As with the *teyolía*, the *tonalli* was of divine origin. During the 13-day period in which a child was born, a ritual would be performed in which the newborn was presented with sunlight reflected in a water-filled vessel. A part of the god-day was bestowed upon the child shortly after birth.

While pouring water over the infant's head during the ritual, the priest infused the child with some of the qualities of the god-day selected. The sunlight's "soul" was dispersed (p. 406) throughout the body but concentrated at the top of the head. From that point onward, the child was considered a "carrier" of that particular god-day, the name of which became one of his or her names. Upon reaching maturity, the individual would be expected to care for his or her *tonalli* through upright, responsible, and compassionate behavior. Failure to do so would have serious consequences for the individual's very existence. This soul provided the individual with a particular physique, a personality that allowed the individual to develop skills, virtues, vices, and what can be likened to one's destiny.

Unlike the *teyolia*, the individual's *tonalli* could leave and did so freely during sleep or intercourse. Any strong shock was considered very dangerous, as the *tonalli* left the body unexpectedly, running the risk of becoming trapped outside the body where it might be captured by the earth gods. An individual that had lost his or her *tonalli* would become seriously ill and eventually die.

The *Ihíyotl*

As the nucleus of vigor, passions, and feelings, the *ihíyotl* was the soul that produced appetites, desires, greed, lust, and courage. Located in the liver, one of its functions was the administration of bile. Its origin was external as it was introduced—like the *tonalli*—through the ritual bath, which also dampened areas of the heart and liver. The gift was requested of the goddess and god of the stellar sky, Citlalicue and Citlallatónac, as well as minor deities in the same region, known as the *ilhuícatl chaneque*. In the prayer, the individual requested that the power develop by uttering the same coupled metaphor used for plant germination: *inic titzmoliniz, inic ticeliaz*, “may [the creature] grow and flourish.”

Parts of this soul could leave the body as emissions expressing vigor, moderating pain, or inflaming courage. Often gaseous moods, smelly and evil, harmed the people, animals, plants, and objects they came in contact with. During sleep, for example, shamans could send their *ihíyotl* to invade other beings in a phenomenon known as *nahualismo*, or shape shifting.

The proper functioning of the *ihíyotl* depended on the maintenance of good relations with other souls, a life of controlled emotions, and sexual balance. Excesses and sexual sins damaged it, leading to emissions that would seriously harm family, neighbors, crops, and other aspects of an individual's life.

Secondary Souls

Humans with power, particularly rulers and shamans, received additional souls from various deities, and with this gift did their bidding on earth. It was common for the *tlahtoque*, Mexica kings, to display images of their associated gods on their attire. Today it is (p. 407) common for shamans to be attributed dual souls, which allow them to act upon supernatural forces.

Such divine possession could be of varying intensity. In some cases, it was permanent and of such strength that the possessed would become a living image of the invading god. An example of one of these human-gods is the Feathered Serpent (*Quetzalcoatl* in Nahuatl).

Other possessions, however, were shorter in length, such as those provoked by the “hearts” of psychoactive substances or intoxicants. Many diseases, artistic inspiration, criminal impulses, lewd desires, and madness were often interpreted as more or less fleeting divine possessions.

Health, Illness, and Health Care

The correct functioning of the body was due largely to balance, primarily between the two complementary yet opposing principles that produced cosmic movement. The opposing forces were commonly identified as either cold or hot. While these states did not refer to actual thermal qualities, they could manifest themselves as such, causing chills or fever. Moreover, there were exceptions, like fevers caused by dental ailments, which were considered cold in nature.

In very general terms, balance could be achieved by controlling the emotions, leading a righteous life, maintaining proper relationships with peers, nourishing ties to the gods (including, above all, the timely performance of rituals), and consuming a balanced diet. These also were classified as hot or cold in nature, meanings that stretched beyond the thermal states themselves.

As an example of an imbalance of hot and cold in the body, the ancient Nahuas considered anger and shame to be particularly dangerous. In anger, heat was concentrated in the innermost part of the body while cold inhabited the exterior of the body. On the other hand, shame involved a concentration of heat on the skin, outside the body, while cold inhabited the body itself. The imbalance was not only dangerous per se, but it favored the loss of important bodily elements or invasion by harmful invisible beings, including the so-called “airs,” often from the underworld.

The same principle of balance ruled much of therapeutic medicine: drugs were classified based on the nature of their active ingredients, cold or hot, while particular foods were also prescribed based on their corrective powers.

Given the characteristics of the etiology, the doctor had to perform the duties of moral, family, social, and ritual advisor.

Human Sacrifice

To understand the concept of human sacrifice and self-sacrifice, we must first make a prior classification of the types of sacrifices made. Reciprocity, fundamental to (p. 408) Mesoamerican religious beliefs, imposed on human beings the terrible obligation to repay the gods for the effort they exerted in creating humans. Since the gods were subjected in this world to the laws imposed by the Sun at the time of creation, their work resulted in fatigue. The god's fatigue was mitigated by offerings of food. Humans fed the tired gods, offering them their property and lives, bodily substance and energy. Thus the gods were compensated for their divine labor from which health, fertility, welfare, rainfall, soil fecundity, crop maturity, and many other prized goods derived.

Some of the human victims offered in sacrifice were called *nextlahualtin*, literally "payments," which crudely identifies their destiny. Another large group of sacrificial victims were known as the *teteo imixiptlahuan*, or "images of the gods." They were human-gods; their bodies had been occupied by the gods during a ritual, converting them into the living vessels of the gods. Thus because the gods had to be reinvigorated periodically, as any weakness was considered extremely dangerous because it reduced their effectiveness. The gods underwent a bodily death that liberated them from their worn-out shell and, through sacrifice, were "reborn" into the world with their initial energy restored.

Ritual cannibalism, also common among the Mexicas, has been interpreted, based on the contemporary description of the practice, as a communion with the ingested god.

Death

Death was considered the payment due to the gods for donating the materials necessary for human life. It was the final installment: heavy substance and bodily energy. Death meant the disintegration of the human being as the parts that had formed the whole began to fall apart. Molina's Spanish-Nahuatl dictionary includes several synonyms for death: *onacico in nacion*, *in nopoliuhya*, *in noxamanca*, *in nopoztequia* (1944 [1571], S-N:fol. 86v); literally, "I've reached my end, my destruction, my breaking point, my fragmentation." Every part of the human being would follow the path of his or her particular destiny. The *ihiyotl*, for example, would wander the earth as a fearsome *yohualehécatl*, or "night air."

The main soul, or *teyolía*, continued to fulfill its destiny after death. As the essence of the human host, and with humans essentially having been created to complement divine efforts through work, the *teyolía* retained its duties even after death.

Sources mention four regions: Mictlan, the underworld, for the common dead; Tonatiuhilhuícatl or “heaven of the Sun,” for those killed during military service or as sacrificial victims, as well as women who died during their first childbirth; Tlalocan, the “place of the god of rain,” a green paradise populated by those who died by drowning, by being struck by lightning, or suffered from “water diseases”; and Chichihualcuaauhco, inhabited by children who passed away before they were old enough to consume corn.

We know little about the beliefs of the life in the hereafter. The dead continued assisting their families for some time, receiving offerings in return. It was not an eternal (p. 409) existence; the trip to the deepest part of Mictlan took four years. The hardships of the journey cleansed the individual’s history. Even today, the Nahuatl consider death a process that cleanses the soul (Signorini and Lupo 1989:48). Following this cleansing process, the *teyolía* lost all vestiges of its former worldly individuality. The *Florentine Codex* says that, in the deepest level, “in the ninth Mictlan, was complete loss” (*Códice Florentino* [Sahagún 1979], Lib. III:fol. 26v). One of the names for Mictlan, *Ximoayan*, is clear on this: *xim* means to “polish, scrape, shave.” The *teyolía* was left empty, devoid of history; all that remained was enough human essence to permit the soul to join another newly begotten human (López Austin 1997:263–267).

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Notes:

(1.) The word *Aztlan*, as most terms in Nahuatl, is pronounced with the stress on the penultimate syllable and not as we often pronounce it today, stressing the final syllable. The same rule applies to Mexico. In this latter toponym, the “x” is pronounced like the English “sh.”

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