

AZTEC GARMENTS:
FROM BIRTH TO FULFILLMENT

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Prepared for delivery at the
1997 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association
Continental Plaza Hotel
Guadalajara, Mexico
April 17-19, 1997

Clothing is an essential to life for a human, no matter in what form it comes in. Clothing helps shield humans from constant direct contact with the elements, but clothing can also be used to place humans in their context within their organized world. The Aztec were no different. The Aztec used clothing to protect themselves from the elements as well as from combat in wars. Clothing was also used to define the class from which a person belonged to and to show how much valor he posed in combat. As George Vaillant in his book Aztecs of Mexico explains, "Clothing... is a guide to the sex, age, group, occupation, rank, and even character of its wearer" (Vaillant 1948:136). The Aztec used clothing as a guide by using different materials and fibers and the amazing array of colors that Mexico and Central American had (and has) to offer by the means of trading between the different nations of the ancient world. Jacques Soustelle gives a glimpse of the magnificence in colors used in Tenochtitlan:

"According to native sources, Motecuhzoma sent Cortes the following presents: first, a costume of Quetzalcoatl, which included a turquoise mask, a plume of *quetzal* feathers, a great jade disk with a gold round in the middle of it, a shield made of gold and mother of pearl, decorated with *quetzal* plumes, a mirror encrusted with turquoises, a bracelet of gems and golden bells, a turquoise head-dress and sandals ornamented with obsidian...

There was a costume of Tlaloc, with a crown of green plumes and jade earrings...[with] a turquoise scepter. The list goes on with a mitre of jaguar-skin adorned with plumes and gems, turquoise and gold earrings..."(Soustelle 1961:231)

No wonder that the conquistadors and the other Spaniards were so taken aback for they "saw things unseen, nor ever dreamed", a level of sophistication rarely ever seen even in Spain (Diaz del Castillo 1950:330).

We will take a closer look and explore the world of clothing from its birth, harvesting the fibers for weaving and decorating, to its fulfillment of purpose, distinguishing differences between men and women, social status and position, and the ranks of warriors; all found in Mexico-Tenochtitlan before Cortes arrived.

THE BIRTH: HARVESTING THE FIBERS

The birth of a piece of fabric comes from the plant from which the fibers are extracted. Depending on the use of the fabric, the fibers of two plants in particular were of great importance to the Aztec. The maguey plant, *metl*, from the agave family was extensively used for making fibers as well as: rope, wine, honey, soap, vinegar, paper, needles, and sometimes employed in construction of shelters (Ortiz de Montellano

1990:109-110; Vaillant 1948:130). The cotton plant was also extensively used for fibers but the plant itself is not as versatile as the maguey.

The work of extracting the fibers from the maguey plant is very hard work and time consuming when compared to preparing cotton. The job of weaving was definitely conducted by a women but as Chloe Sayer points out "men are generally responsible for stripping the fibers... a task requiring considerable strength" (Sayer 1985:130). To obtain fibers from the maguey plant a complicated process of cooking, beating, and rotting had to take place. The leaves of the maguey plant would be removed from the core of the "plants which no longer yield[ed] *aguamiel* [sweet sap]" (Sayer 1985:130;Chavez 1972:31). The leaves would then be roasted until soft and placed in water that contained maize dough until it was completely rotted (Sayer 1985:130; Chavez 1972:31). Once the leaves had rotten they would be taken out of the water and dried in the sun (Sayer 1985:130;Chavez 1972:31). The next process would be to beat and scrape the pulp out of the fibers, leaving thread to be spun with a spindle (Sayer 1985:130;Chavez 1972:31). Frederic Hicks mentions that maguey fibers are considered "medium and long-staple fibers...often spun with a drop-spindle technique" (Hicks 1994:91).

Cotton was also work intensive but it did not require boiling or brute strength. There were two varieties of cotton

used by the Aztecs; white cotton known as *ichcatl* and the "coyote-coloured strain named *coyoichcatl*" (Sayer 1985:62). To prepare the cotton for spindle, the ripe bolls would be harvested and allowed to dry before picking the seeds and impurities from them (Sayer 1985:130;Chavez 1972:30). At which time they are:

"fluffed out and spread on a...mat...which usually rests on a cushion of corn husks or other plant materials. Next the cotton is pounded, slowly but firmly, with wooden beaters... As the fibers begin to adhere to one another, the blows become stronger, and after the cotton has been turned to ensure regular beating, it is shaped into smooth and even strip ready for the spindle" (Sayer 1985:130-131).

Frederic Hicks mentions that "the cotton was laid out on mats on the house floor and beaten to thin it, so the fibers could more easily separate. It was then spun, using a spindle (*malacatl*) made of wood with a ceramic whorl... [and] a small bowl(*tzahualcaxitl*) was used to support the spindle" (Hicks 1994:91). The cotton process was probably done only by women (Hicks 1994:90).

WEAVING

Weaving was an essential part of the Aztecs way of life.

Weaving was considered:

"the sole domain of women, they were passed down from generation to generation, and we are told by Motolinia that it was customary, soon after the birth of a baby girl, to place in her hand 'a spindle and weaving stick, as a sign that she should be diligent and housewifely, a good spinner and a better weaver'" (Sayer 1990:61).

However girls were not allowed to spin nor weave until they became of age usually around six or seven and then only to help the mother with her weaving. At the age of fourteen the girl would be taught in the arts of weaving (Lechuga 1982:23).

Weaving women were considered to be under the protection of the goddess Xochiquetzal who was also associated with love, flowers and youth (Soustelle 1970:132; Sayer 1990:61). Weaving was an integral part of life to the Aztecs for textiles were used to pay tribute, wrap the dead, as payment of dowry, and "lengths of cloth known as quachtli were an intrinsic feature of the Aztec economy" (Sayer 1990:61).

Once the fibers of the plants are removed and prepared, thread is created which can be used for weaving or decorating fabric with embroidery and stitch. The Aztec used the backstrap loom for weaving. As Sayer states:

"The apparatus is simple, with no rigid framework... Extremely long webs of cloth can be woven on a backstrap loom, but the width is determined by the weaver's armspan. The weaving process proceeds away from the weaver, who winds her newly completed cloth on to a rolling stick" (Sayer 1990:21-22).

Not only did the Aztec exceed in the techniques of weaving but also in capturing the bright and vivid colors still seen in Mexico today. The array of colors achieved in the Aztec world was partly due to the extensive trade networks that connected the vast land from one ocean to the other. "In general, the process of dye making involved crushing the leaves or other color-yielding part...and boiling it in a pot to extract the pigment. This then settled as a residue which could be formed into cakes" for easy transportation (Hicks 1994:91). The sources of the colors for dyeing comes from just about anything "flowers, fruits, barks, roots, leaves, and various types of woods", as well as from animals (cochineal) and minerals (Sayer 1990:143).

THE BASIC CLOTHING

The simple male outfit consisted of two basic pieces which only differed from one person to the other by its decoration and material. The *maxtli*, or loin-cloth was made of a long piece of fabric, usually of maguey or cotton. The garment "went round his waist and between his legs, to be tied in front; the two ends, often fringed and embroidered [depending on social rank], fell before and behind" or knotted in the front (Soustelle 1970:131; Anawalt 1996:7). The *tilmatli* was a cloak made from a "rectangular piece of cloth, and it was tied over the right shoulder or the chest" (Soustelle 1970:132; Vaillant 1948:136).

The cloak served two purposes, one was to have a visual ranking of the person in society, and the other as a blanket, for "a man, on sitting down, would slide the cloak round so as to bring it all forward and cover his body and legs" (Soustelle 1970:132).

The loin-cloth and cloak were integral parts of the economics of tribute which "brought thousands of loads of the splendid cloaks, loin-cloths and skirts woven in the eastern provinces, Tochpan, Quauhtochco, Cuetlaxtlan, and Tochtepec, to" Tenochtitlan (Soustelle 1970:132). Frederic Hicks estimated, using the Codex Mendoza, that Tenochtitlan received

32,400 loads of fabric and 39,600 loads of decorated cloth as tribute per tribute period (Hicks 1994:99). To give a reference as to how valuable cloth and cloaks were to the Aztecs, Hicks explains that:

"We know remarkably little...[but] we know something of the value of slaves (8 to 40 *mantas* [blankets]), feathers (a bunch of 20 for 20 *mantas*), a square *braza* of land (one *manta de Cuernavaca*), and a large *cano* of water for a fiesta (one *manta*)...*mantas* were worth either 100, 80, or 65 cacao beans each, depending on their quality" (Hicks 1994:99).

Women's clothing was just as basic as the men's. There were three commonly used pieces of clothing by the Aztec women, the *huipil*, the *cueitl*, and the *quechquemitl*. According to Glafira Ruiz Chavez the skirt was rapped around the waist and would cover half way down the legs, while the *huipil* had short sleeves half way down the arms, and decorated with geometric designs or nature scenes (Ruiz Chavez 1972:46-47). Elizabeth Baquedano describes the skirt or *cueitl* as being a very long strip of cotton cloth wrapped around the waist and held in place by a cloth belt. This would then be covered by the blouse or *huipil* which was sleeveless and went past the hips (Baquedano 1987:51). There is one more piece of clothing which is still under debate as to whether it was commonly used or if

it was only used by priestess and goddess idols, and that is the *quechquemitl* (Ruiz Chavez 1972:47; Sayer 1990:67). The *huipil* would be the equivalent to the male cloak as far as status could be discern from its decorations.

SOCIAL STATUS

The social setting in Tenochtitlan at the time before Cortes was one of a highly stratified society. There was very little room to advance but a person could by the means of the military, the priesthood and by the *pochteca*, or traders. The common people were called the *macehual* those who did not belong to the ruling class, the merchant class, nor to the craftsmen class, and yet they were not slaves. These people were farmers, carpenters, potters, basket makers, and any other forms of labor, who were not specialized in that field. They were basically the working class who constituted the bulk of the population of Tenochtitlan. The *macehual* had to pay tribute as a form of tax by working in public works, like constructing temples, and producing products they made, pottery, etc. The *macehual* could advance his social status, but that was only by distinguishing himself in war (Moctezuma 1989:84). When a commoner's son joined the army at the age of ten he would have to take a prisoner in battle to remain a soldier. However if he had no more accomplishments during the next few battles then he

would have to go back and remain a *macehual* (Soustelle 1970:43).

The *macehual* were allowed to only wear clothing made of maguey fibers with very little decoration in the clothing. The common people still wore the same style of dress as the upper classes, it just was not made from cotton nor so richly decorated. The men used the loin-cloth and the cloak, both made of maguey fibers, much like linen for the Europeans. However there was a limit to the length of the cloak which could not pass the knees (Sayer 1990:69). The women of the lower class also wore the same basic outfit of the skirt and the huipil. Again the fabric was not that of cotton but apparently the Otomi were excellent weavers of the maguey fibers and could create "fine thread and remarkably supple cloth (Sayer 1990:69).

The upper class constituted the noble class and the *pochteca*. These two groups did not share the same privileges but they were better off than the common people. The noble class, or *calpulleque*, had some specific privileges not shared with others, some were:

- (1) they were not obliged to work the land;
- (2) only noblemen were entitle to hold land of their own;
- (3) they were preferred for public office;
- (4) they were exempt from all forms of internal tributes;
- (5) some special tribunals were reserved

expressly for nobles; (6) the *calmecac* school existed especially for the instruction of the sons of nobles; (7) they were allowed more than one wife; and (8) they were entitled to bear certain insignia (Moctezuma 1989:81).

The *pochteca* were a group all onto themselves. Since they were traders and "brought produce for the governor with them, paid a tribute and held large banquets", they were respected (Moctezuma 1989:82). However they were not liked by everyone for they were perceived to be too ambitious and "nurtured ideas that differed from those of the nobility" (Moctezuma 1989:82). Soustelle points out that since they traveled so much and so far they had no priests but themselves which meant that they worshipped their own gods and in their own ways (Soustelle 1970:61).

The upper class unlike the lower class *macehual* had a greater degree of freedom and expression over what they could wear; they were still restricted but a person from the upper class and warriors could achieve a higher standing. The upper class was privileged enough to wear sandals, or *cactli* made of agave and maguey decorated with "gold, gems, the skins of wild animals such as ocelots and jaguars, the feathers of tropical birds and rich embroidery" (Sayer 1990:64; Duran 1964:131). But again there were restrictions as to who and where sandals can be worn. Duran mentions that "King Moteczoma...decreed the

following laws for the future[:]...'Only the king and the Prime Minister Tlacaehel may wear sandals within the palace. ...The great noblemen are the only ones to be allowed to wear sandals in the city and no one else...' (Duran 1964:131).

The garments that the upper class wore were of extraordinary skills with feathers, gold, vivid colors and designs. The upper class male wore their cloaks made from cotton and dyed in many brilliant colors. During winter time the cloaks worn had a mixture of cotton and rabbit fur, and sometimes feathers (Soustelle 1970:132). The

"feather cloaks were highly esteemed...[in which] the process consisted in tying the stems of the feathers into the fabric during the weaving process" (Vaillant 1948:137-144).

Where there was not a lot of color in the lower classes the upper classes made up the difference as Vaillant describes what must have been a common sight:

"More individuals wore the trappings of the high office, such as nodding panaches of quetzal plumes and cloaks, the designs of which were worked in feathers like the personal insignia on their circular shields" (Vaillant 1948:229).

The women wore highly embroidered huipiles with varying designs and colors. Both men and women wore an abundance of jewelry from earrings, necklaces, and bracelets to gem and metal nose and chin jewels (Soustelle 1970:138). The Otomi women would color their skin and teeth to lighten and darken, respectably, which began to take hold in Tenochtitlan by the time Cortes arrived.

YAOYOTL- WAR

The military forces of Tenochtitlan were divided into several different groups, with different customs and costumes. Eduardo Moctezuma explains that,

“the Mexica military was mainly composed of commoners from the calpulli-men of low birth who, through the army and distinction on the battle field, were able to improve their social rank and even obtain land” (Moctezuma 1989:89).

To be able to improve their ranking, the warrior needed to capture or kill four enemies. At accomplishing such a task the rewards would be to have the hair shaved a certain way, and possibly sit on the Council, or participate in dances (Moctezuma 1989:89). The Order of the Eagle and Jaguar were dedicated only to the nobles and all held position in the

councils (Moctezuma 1989:89). Soustelle explains that as warriors:

"rose in the hierarchy their fame grew, and as they earned their right to wear more and more splendid ornaments and clothes so at the same time they received gifts in kind and the rents of various estates. ...They were wealthy men, with their fine houses, many servants, brilliant clothes and jewels...but it must be remembered that this was wealth that came only after honourable achievements" (Soustelle 1970:45).

The warriors used a garment that completely covered the entire body, made of cloth and covered in multicolored feathers of all types of birds, it was called *tlahuiztli* (Baquedano 1987:53). The outfit would be styled to represent different animals or combinations of colors with a matching helmet, also covered in feathers (Baquedano 1987:53). It was not strange to see a great variety of different military outfits. One important garment used by the Aztecs and later adopted by the Spaniards was a "body armor of quilted cotton, soaked in brine...this was [an] effective protection against clubs and missiles" (Vaillant 1948:217).

There were many different groups of warriors but the most popular and common were the Eagles, the Jaguars, the Coyote, and The Skull-face. These warrior were either born to the rank

or were extremely valiant in combat. The garments mostly used by these four groups were of the *tlahuiztli* style (full body cover and helmet) representing the animal they belong to. Elizabeth Baquedano explains that to receive a Coyote rank one must have captured six live enemies (Baquedano 1987:55).

The magnificence of the Aztec empire was not comparable to any other civilization at the time. The accomplishments and the skills harvested to create the jewels of clothing that walked the Earth at the time of Cortes is beyond our imagination. The few luck explorers that were able to witness the incredible city of Tenochtitlan before its fall tried their very best to describe the world they were conquering. But even with all of the letters, journals and log books written, one still feels that it is all a mere glimpse into the world that was. One can still walk just about anywhere in Mexico today and catch a snippet of the bright colors and the contrasting arrangements of color not seen any where else on Earth. All are a rich legacy left behind and carried forward into today.

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