Introduction

. . . men build their cultures by huddling together, nervously loquacious, at the edge of the abyss.

Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*[1]

In August 1521 the city of Tenochtitlan–Tlatelolco,[2] once the magnificent centre of a great system of tribute exaction, but reduced in the course of its long and desperate defence to a place of desolation, fell to a body of Spaniards led by Hernando Cortés and a shifting coalition of Indian 'allies'. So ended the public political existence of the Aztecs, as we have come to call them. The word 'Aztec' has been used to mean a number of things, from the 'empire' which sprawled across much of modern Mexico, to the people of the magnificent lake city who were its masters. It is the people of the city in their last unthreatened years who are the subjects of this study. While the 'Tlatelolca' and the 'Tenocha' of the twin city strenuously maintained their separateness between themselves, they collectively called themselves the 'Mexica', as I will do, not least to avoid the heavy freight that 'Aztec' has come to bear. That word I will reserve for the tribute empire that the Mexica, in confederacy with other Valley of Mexico peoples, had constructed by the close of the fifteenth century.

Introduction

This is a study built out of the attempt to catch attitudes and characteristic styles and emotions from scattered, fragmentary and defective texts. I want to discover something of the distinctive tonalities of life as it was lived in the city of Tenochtitlan in the early sixteenth century on the eve of the Spanish conquest. My interest is not primarily with the doings of the great and powerful or with the wisdom and aspirations of the élite, who unsurprisingly have generated most of the sources, but with some of the multiple ways in which ordinary Mexica men- and women-in-the-city-street made sense of their world. By this I do not mean anything as self-conscious as 'ideology' nor as passive as 'world view', but rather those characteristic ways of apprehending, evaluating, enjoying, and managing the world in greeting, eating, trading, fighting, producing and reproducing that we obscurely but comfortably label as 'culture'.

There is one activity for which the 'Aztecs' were notorious: the large-scale killing of humans in ritual sacrifices. The killings were not remote top-of-the pyramid affairs. If only high priests and rulers killed, they carried out most of their butchers' work *en plein air*, and not only in the main temple precinct, but in the neighbourhood temples and on the streets. The people were implicated in the care and preparation of the victims, their delivery to the place of death, and then in the elaborate processing of the bodies: the dismemberment and distribution of heads and limbs, flesh and blood and flayed skins. On high occasions warriors carrying gourds of human blood or wearing the dripping skins of their captives ran through the streets, to be ceremoniously welcomed into the dwellings; the flesh of their victims seethed in domestic cooking pots;

human thighbones, scraped and dried, were set up in the courtyards of the households – and all this among a people notable for a precisely ordered polity, a grave formality of manner, and a developed regard for beauty.

Europeans, from the first Spanish conquerors who saw Mexica society in action to those of us who wistfully strive to, have been baffled by that unnerving discrepancy between the high decorum and fastidious social and aesthetic sensibility of the Mexica world, and the massive carnality of the killings and dismemberings: between social grace and monstrous ritual. The Spanish friars who followed close on the heels of the conquerors saw the Mexica *ecclesia* as admirably stately in the formality of its institutions and practices – a distinct priesthood, a complex of temples, a liturgy, a religious calendar, a most devoted commitment to 'penances' – yet drenched in human blood. It was that intolerable paradox which led some of the first missionaries to the view that one of Christ's apostles had somehow contrived to preach to the Indians, who in the long interregnum had come to get parts of the message horribly wrong; and others to identify the brutal, sickening practices as demonic, the Devil's parody and perversion of the mysteries of the true Church: an intervention arising out of his endless malevolence towards humanity in general, and towards Christian missionaries in particular. W. H. Prescott, writing in the early eighteen forties what is still possibly the most widely read history of the conquest of Mexico in English, was sufficiently baffled by the contradiction to postulate two distinct sources for Mexica culture, seeing practices of what he took to be refined sensibility as inherited from the Toltecs of Tula or 'Tollan', one-time rulers

of the valley, being juxtaposed with the 'sanguinary rites' of 'unmitigated ferocity' born of the Mexica's own rough beginnings. Prescott's bewildered distaste found its prime focus not in the killings, but in his (erroneous) view of the Mexica manner of consuming the flesh of their victims. It was presented, he said, not as 'the coarse repast of famished cannibals, but [as] a banquet teeming with delicious beverages and delicate viands, prepared with art, and attended by both sexes, who . . . conducted themselves with all the decorum of civilized life'. His unease was manifest: 'Surely, never were refinement and the extreme of barbarism brought so closely into contact with each other!'[3]

The shadow of the division which cost Prescott such perturbation can still be discerned in recent scholarship, although the line is differently drawn. During the rapid Balkanization in the early days of the young discipline of 'Aztec studies', the detail of the human sacrifice issue, and initially the whole matter of religion, tended to be set aside in favour of other matters – state formation, economic arrangements – taken to be somehow closer to the hard surfaces of life. Accordingly a few grandly simple explanations for the mass killings were aired: human sacrifice as a device to enrich a protein-poor diet; human sacrifice as the invention of a sinister and cynical élite, a sort of amphetamines-for-the-people account; human sacrifice as technology, the Mexica response to the second law of thermodynamics, with the taking of the hot and pulsing human heart their despairing effort to replace energy lost by entropic waste.[4] Over the last decade scholarly interest has spiralled back to the meanings of the activity which consumed so much Mexica time and energy, but

recent studies have remained pitched at an ideological or a theological level of abstraction, which in my view too often assumes that which most needs to be demonstrated. They have also tended to focus (naturally enough, given the tilt of the sources) on the highly visible 'official' religious performances staged in the main temple precinct of Tenochtitlan, rather than those at a local or household level: performances financed by an expanding state, and correctly if not comprehensively characterized as a theatre of terror designed to proclaim, indeed to express and to constitute, the glory and power of the state. Thus a clear distinction has come to be drawn between what is seen as the bloodthirsty imperial cult of the warriors, and those gentler agricultural rituals cherished by the common folk.[5]

Most reconstructions of Nahuatl thought rest on the semantic and etymological analysis of sixteenth-century texts in Latin and Nahuatl. The method has its limitations, which have been sensitively set out by one of its most distinguished practitioners, Alfredo López Austin. López Austin candidly acknowledges that the image retrievable from such sources 'largely reflects the thoughts of the dominant ideology, and may be attributed only very abstractly to the Nahua people'. Further, he bases his account of the Nahua world on a simple Marxist analysis, and so assumes a necessary opposition 'between members of the community and those of the privileged group'.[6]

There is nothing remarkable about this. Social distinctions and categories are routinely taken as the frame for the analysis of what has come to be called 'mentalités'.[7] But while such a distinction might well have existed in the

subjugated territories, I am not persuaded of its reality in Tenochtitlan. Some distinctions were heavily marked in Nahuatl writings: the abyss between lords and commoners, with its few perilous bridges across; between the man of wealth distributing largesse and the poor who could only receive it; between the woman as heart of the home and the man as destined for battle. It is also true that in Tenochtitlan particular groups bore particular responsibility towards particular deities, and that the warriors owed a special duty to the war god Huitzilopochtli, and conquered in his name. But temporal and cultural distance can lend a spurious simplicity and clarity which denies the rich muddle of a more local view. It is possible that the carrier squatting back on his heels in the marketplace waiting for hire, and watching the great lord and his entourage stalk by, sustained a very different view of the workings of the world they both inhabited. I do not intend to assume so. My concern is to discover how ordinary people understood 'human sacrifice': their inescapable intimacy with victims' bodies, living and dead; how that intimacy was rendered tolerable; what meanings were attached to it. Mexica 'beliefs' have been discussed confidently enough, but again, academics being natural theologians, usually at an unnaturally abstract pitch. My interest is not in belief at this formal level, but in sensibility: the emotional, moral and aesthetic nexus through which thought comes to be expressed in action, and so made public, visible, and accessible to our observation. Therefore my focus will be less on words than actions, and especially ritual actions, not only because they are the best documented, but because of their revelatory potential.

The enterprise is inescapably quixotic.[8] Even in face-to-face situations emotions are fugitive for the subject, and partially veiled from the most acute observer. Given our temporal and cultural distance from the Mexica, we can hope to glimpse mood and emotion only in public circumstances, and where they are writ large or repetitively. Victor Turner has written of the 'root paradigms', the 'irreducible life stances', of a culture. These are to be sought, he says, 'not in theological treatises or explicit codes of conduct and morality, but in the stress of vital action [where] firm definitional outlines become blurred by the encounter of emotionally charged wills'.[9] 'Vital action' is therefore one quarry; not, as Turner had found it, in particular 'social dramas', those individual processes in Mexica life being largely lost to us, but wherever there are signs of general abrasions and tensions in the mundane world; and also, as I will argue, in ritual.[10]

The Mexica, latecomers to the valley and to glory, had to create themselves as an imperial people in tandem with their creation of their imperial city. A major tool in that double making was ritual, which for the Mexica was a highly elastic and dynamic expressive mode, more street theatre than museum piece. A great warrior sedately turns in the dance, the detail of his military biography inscribed in his glittering insignia; his wealth, his prestige and his power manifested in the respectful space left around him. A novice warrior dances. His years and inexperience exclude him from his elder's glory. But his youth – the exuberance of his leapings and turnings, the toss of the heavy hair, the play of light on smooth skin – carries its own message of an alternative aesthetic and an

alternative source for the lustre of prestige. For both, battlefield combat was only one component of the complex experience of 'being a warrior', which was possibly most distilled in moments of formal display. These, at least, are my convictions, and my justification for the orientation of this study. The exploration of Mexica ritual, its collective concoction, and the many facets and uses of its enchantments, will occupy many of the following pages.

The distinction between 'high' and 'local' ritual in Tenochtitlan is difficult to sustain. Even in the high ceremonial at the great temple precinct there was so much involvement of 'popular' groups, so much that was minimally scripted, so much space for comment, that it is impossible to insist that only the original organizers' vision was being realized. Those extended performances, recruiting different groups of participants from different social levels in complex sequence, were themselves sculpted successions of choreographed emotions loosely organized around a theme, and made the more potent for being repeatable, public, and (perhaps, although this must be demonstrated) shared. One task will be to identify those themes and emotions, to understand their orchestration and to discover how, and how far, they caught up the themes and emotions of key experiences of individual social lives for distillation and dramatization through the ritual aesthetic. My zone of analysis will therefore include the whole span of the work of the gods in Tenochtitlan, from high ritual through to domestic, local and neighbourhood observances and involvements, and to identify the routines and institutions through which Mexica men and women, at different social levels, in different social

roles, at different points in the life cycle, were brought to understand the city and the world in which they lived, and to identify its necessities.

The strategy of focussing on observable action as revelatory of thought is less self-denying than it might seem; the texts are, like all texts, contingent, with what little exegesis they offer coming from the élite. Nor is it merely a negative necessity. The Mexica, like Clifford Geertz's Balinese (and like, as I suspect, many peoples) 'cast their most comprehensive ideas of the way things ultimately are, and the way men should therefore act, into immediately apprehended sensuous symbols . . . rather than into a discursively apprehended, ordered set of explicit "beliefs" '.[11] My interest is in that trafficking in symbols. My most pressing epistemological problem will therefore not be in sorting false from putatively authentic consciousness, but in estimating the alarmingly mutable gap between thought and its expression in action. These problems and doubts burden all human interaction, but they weigh particularly heavily on our interrogation of the alien dead.

The reconstruction of the patterns of life of 'ordinary' Mexica has been more clouded than clarified by the intensive work of the last few years. Ingenious research into such key matters as the basic forms of social organization, land distribution, and the precise nature and powers of the *calpulli* or 'big house', the core territorial and social unit, has yielded greatly increased knowledge, but not as yet a coherent view. Jacques Soustelle would be more hesitant now to write his *Daily Life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest* than he was thirty years ago.[12] Such is the nature of progress. Nonetheless

I want to retrieve, in David Cohen's marvellous phrase, the 'interior architecture' of Mexica society: those most local institutions and patterned experiences, those clusters of sociabilities, through which individuals are made participant in cultural knowledge.[13] I will need to map the experiential landscape of household, neighbourhood, ward, and city; to track both the habitual and holiday engagement of individuals with persons and places through those zones; to be attentive to the conventional wisdom enshrined in the traditional displays of eloquence, as to unregarded asides, to the local customs offered as appropriate frames for the crises and joys of individual and group life, to the doings of delinquents, to 'superstitions', as the Spanish friars sourly labelled those practical notions for managing the sacred when it intruded into daily life; while keeping in mind the more formal performances at the main temple precinct. The procedure depends on an eclectic array and a promiscuous exploitation of sources.[14] It also entails commitment to a view of 'customs' as habituated but not mechanical action, and to the notion that beliefs do not float, pure bright shapes, somewhere above the murk of actual conduct, but inform it.

The account will unhappily, but by necessity, lack historical depth. While material for the last decades of the city's life is relatively abundant, the texts for all earlier periods are fragmentary, scattered, and in that agonistic polity typically written from positions of furious partisanship, and so are not amenable to the kind of sustained interrogation I have in mind. There will be no individuals in the story: at this distance any aspiration to individuation must be illusory. Velleities, however strongly felt, being unexpressed, will go unregarded, while 'deviants'