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6 The metamorphosis of Xochiquetzal

A window on womanhood in pre- and post-conquest Mexico

Geoffrey G. McCafferty and Sharisse D. McCafferty

Introduction

Early Spanish chroniclers attempting to describe Mexican cosmology were confronted by a bewildering array of supernatural entities. Relying on their medieval, male mindsets, sixteenth-century Catholic priests integrated pre-Columbian religious beliefs into categories that they did understand and thus constructed a Classical pantheon of gods and goddesses who controlled different elements of the natural world. While this undoubtedly captured some sense of pre-Columbian religious ideology, it also tended to rigidify what in fact was a very fluid system with deities sharing attributes and assuming other roles depending on ritual context.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in relation to the female deities. Catholic priests were ill prepared to deal with females as active and powerful participants in religion (Brown 1983). Particularly confusing was the cult of the earth/fertility goddesses (Sullivan 1982), also known as the Teteo-Innan complex (Nicholson 1971), which combined numerous personae in different phases of the female life cycle: young and sensual, mature and nurturing, old and wise. These deities were very important in Aztec culture because of their control over domestic production and sexual reproduction, and because of the specialized groups that held the goddesses in esteem: midwives, healers, harlots, and artisans.

Within this group of female deities was one of particular importance to the arts (Figure 6.1). Xochiquetzal, or "Precious Flower," was the goddess who introduced the artistic skills of spinning, weaving, featherworking, painting, sculpting, and metalworking (Durán 1971: 239). But Xochiquetzal was also a patroness of the sexual arts, revered by harlots and lovers alike. As a lunar deity (Milbrath 1995), her relationship to productivity extended into the domain of fertility, not only for women who made offerings to her for help during childbirth, but for all generative life forces. Xochiquetzal was the essential creative force, and those who participated in creative acts – transforming nature into art – paid homage to her.

In this chapter we discuss some of the characteristics of Xochiquetzal and her avatars. Specific themes addressed are her role in craft production and the embodiment of female ideals of sexuality and fertility. Additionally, we explore

Figure 6.1 Xochiquetzal with quetzal headdress and twin feathered plumes, jeweled face ornamentation, and *quechquemitl*. After Codex Borbonicus (1974: Plate 19)

the importance of Xochiquetzal and her followers in sorcery and ritual prostitution. A fundamental theme is to distinguish between the goddess cult as perceived by Spanish chroniclers in contrast to pre-Columbian representations in order to chart the metamorphosis of the goddess and, through her, female identity during the process of conquest and conversion (Quiñones Keber 1988). Finally, we discuss the possibility that the goddess served as a symbol of female power to be emulated by women, in contrast to the more widely recognized male ideology of the Aztec state (Nash 1978; Rodríguez 1988; but see Brumfiel 1991; McCafferty and McCafferty 1988).

A frustration in attempts to reconstruct the role of women in the pre-Columbian past is their relative invisibility in the ethnohistoric record.

Chroniclers, exclusively male, paid little attention to the activities of women, and even less to their religious practices. As Sahagún admonished his indigenous subjects in the *Florentine Codex* (1950–82, Book 1: 72): "This which your forefathers proceeded to do in worshipping many women, was indeed a confusion and laughable." Textual evidence that *is* available is suspect because of a pervasive androcentrism in the primary documents that tends to present a stereotype of a feminine ideal (from the male perspective) rather than the reality of practice. What we attempt to do, then, is balance that stereotype against a variety of tantalizing shreds of evidence to identify a series of alternative practices associated with the Xochiquetzal cult. While admittedly speculative, the contrasts provided suggest important distinctions between the representation and practice of gender relations in Aztec Mexico. By contrasting pre-Columbian images of Xochiquetzal with the Colonial accounts of the goddess and her attendants, it is possible to document the transformation of the cult as it was "reinvented" by the Catholic Church (cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).

The divine Ms. X

Aztec religion is best known for the intensity of its cult of human sacrifice, and the continual opposition of birth and death imagery pervades Aztec ideology (Klein 1975). The sun could be regenerated only by consuming human hearts, thus death had to precede life. The goddess Xochiquetzal epitomized the transformation of life from death in the symbolic use of butterfly motifs, worn as face paint (by avatar Chiconauhui Izquintli, "Nine Dog"), a golden nose ornament, feather banner, or in her headdress (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 9: 79–80; Book 8: 34; see also Berlo 1983). The transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly is a natural example of the principle of metamorphosis. Butterflies and birds were believed to carry the souls of dead warriors to their own special paradise (J. L. M. Furst 1995: 27–28), as seen in the representation of butterfly breast plates on warriors, for example the Atlantean warriors from Tula. Another avatar of Xochiquetzal, Itzpapalotl ("Obsidian Butterfly"), was the primordial warrior and first to die in battle (Berlo 1983; Nicholson 1971). The dualism of Xochiquetzal as creative force and warrior continues the theme of structural opposition that is common to the earth/fertility goddess complex (Sullivan 1982).

The opposition of life and death is further demonstrated in the twenty-day festival of Pachtontli, dedicated specifically to Xochiquetzal (Durán 1971: 244). Celebrated in October, this was known as the "Death of the Flowers," and was associated with rituals of renewal. In the principal sacrifices of the festival, two virgins of noble lineage were sacrificed, and a goddess impersonator in the full costume of Xochiquetzal was first sacrificed and then flayed. A male priest put on the skin of the victim and the costume of the goddess, and was made to imitate the female task of weaving. At the same time, artisans adorned in animal costumes danced while displaying the tools of their particular craft specializations.

Xochiquetzal was originally a Tlahuica deity who was adopted into the Aztec

pantheon when the cotton-producing area of southern Morelos was incorporated into the Aztec empire (Sullivan 1982: 17). The conceptual character of an earth/fertility goddess, however, possibly dates to as early as the Olmec Period, *c.* 1000 BCE (P. Furst 1981), and it has been suggested that the Great Goddess was the predominant religious force in Teotihuacan during the Classic Period (Berlo 1992). An elaborate ceremonial precinct featuring female imagery has been discovered at Xochitecatl in the Puebla/Tlaxcala valley, where hundreds of terracotta figurines depict women with elaborate floral headdresses similar to those later identified with the Postclassic Xochiquetzal (Serra Puche 1996; Spranz 1982).

As part of the Teteo-Innan complex (Nicholson 1971; Sullivan 1982), Xochiquetzal shares attributes with Tlazolteotl, Toci, Itzpapalotl, Chalchiutlicue, and Cihuacoatl, among others. This group of female deities combined elements of the archetypal goddess complex, especially in their control over fertility, childbirth, and domestic production. By dividing the "Mother Goddess" role among multiple deities, Nahua religion recognized distinctions inherent in the female life cycle, with separate avatars for different phases, and with specific characteristics for each.

In Aztec mythology Xochiquetzal was associated with the primordial woman Tonacacihuatl (Nicholson 1971; Sullivan *et al.* 1997: 140–141, n. 16) and was perceived by the Spanish as a parallel to the Christian Eve (Brundage 1982). Xochiquetzal lived in Tamoanchan, a mythical garden paradise. In the *Histoyre du Mechique*, Xochiquetzal and her solar-god husband Piltzintecuhtli produced a son, Centeotl, while dwelling in the underworld (*Histoyre du Mechique* 1973: 109; Sahagún 1997: 140–141). From the body of the young Centeotl grew plants upon which Mesoamerican civilization was based, including corn and cotton. For this reason Xochiquetzal was closely associated with fertility and sustenance.

In the *Anales of Cuauhtitlan*, Xochiquetzal (as Quetzalpetlatl, "Feather Mat") and her brother Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl became drunk on pulque (fermented juice of the agave plant) and abandoned their sacred vows, including perhaps vows of chastity (Codice Chimalpopoca 1992: 10; Brundage 1982: 258). According to the historical mythology of the Aztecs, this scandalous behavior forced Quetzalcoatl to flee the Eden-like Tollan and led to the downfall of the Toltec empire.

Xochiquetzal was personified as young and attractive, the essence of sensual femininity (Figure 6.2). She had long black hair with bangs (cut straight across the forehead), worn in a style associated with young women. Xochiquetzal wore a twisted headband with floral decoration and a distinctive pair of green feather plumes (Durán 1971: 244). In other depictions the twin plumes were stylized as two upright locks of hair. The hairstyle of double locks appears throughout the *Florentine Codex* as a characteristic of mature women (Figure 6.3), possibly even as an indication of motherhood (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 10: 178) or, more generally, sexual activity.

Her face is shown with face paint, or possibly tattooing (Figure 6.4). This can take the form of a band of circular "jewels" across the cheek to the nose, or it can appear as intricate geometric patterns. In other cases, however, Xochiquetzal is

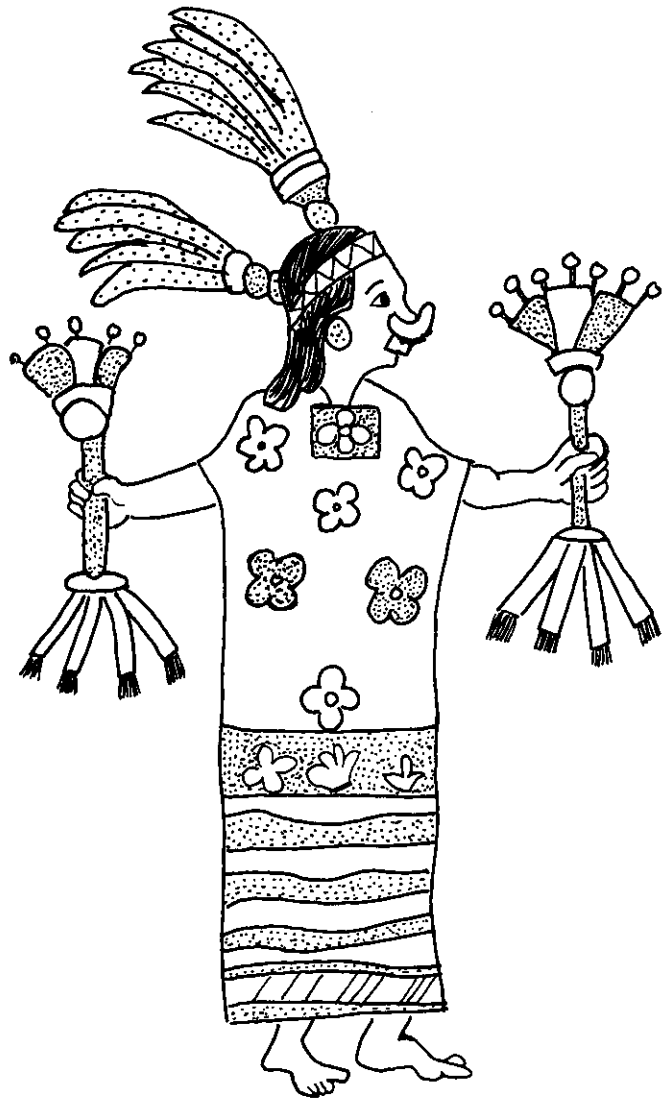

Figure 6.2 Xochiquetzal with twin feathered plumes and elaborately embroidered *huipil*. After Durán (1971: Plate 25)

depicted with black bitumen face paint around her mouth, a characteristic also found among the "cloistered maidens" dedicated to Tezcatlipoca (Durán 1971: 105). Bitumen, mixed with *axin* (made from insect eggs), was known as *chicle*. It was chewed almost exclusively by women, for enjoyment and for the sweet smell it gave the breath (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 10: 89–90; McCafferty and McCafferty 1991). Chewing bitumen in public was common among unmarried women, while married women chewed only in private. Men also chewed *chicle*, but never in

Figure 6.3 Aztec noblewomen conversing. Note double locks. After Sahagún (1950–82, Book 10: Figure 83)

Figure 6.4 Xochiquetzal with twin plumes, elaborate facial decoration, butterfly nose ornament, and intricately woven *quechquemitl*. After Codex Borgia (1963: Plate 62)

Figure 6.5 Dual aspects of Xochiquetzal, as goddess of love (left) and as patroness of harlots (right). After Codex Borgia (1963: Plate 59)

public unless they were homosexuals. Harlots often chewed publicly, with the gum-like substance "clacking like castanets" (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 10: 89).

Xochiquetzal is usually depicted wearing a triangular cape, or *quechquemitl* (Figure 6.5; Anawalt 1982). She is frequently shown partially nude, with her breasts bare beneath the *quechquemitl*, possibly as an emphasis of her role as voluptuous goddess of sexuality and reproduction. Her skirt is elaborately decorated with embroidered and woven designs, probably in reference to her role as patroness of the textile arts (Figure 6.6).

Flowers were an important element in the identity of Xochiquetzal (Durán 1971: 435) and were prominent metaphors in Mexican mythology (Heyden 1983). In another parallel to the Christian Eve, Xochiquetzal was the beautiful virgin goddess who dwelled in the paradise of Tamoanchan but was cast out and banished to the earth for plucking a flower from the Tree of Life (Brundage 1982: 39–42). The *Codex Magliabechiano* (Boone 1983: 206) records the myth that from the semen of Quetzalcoatl a bat was born, which bit Xochiquetzal on her sex organ and thereby caused flowers to first appear (Heyden 1983: 105). Flowers, then, became a symbol of all sensual delights, including love, art, music, and the life force.[1]

Medicinal properties of flowers and plants were learned by followers of the female deities, including healers, midwives, and sorceresses (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 2: 17, 107; Book 5: 183; Heyden 1983). Book 11 of the *Florentine Codex* features a variety of medicinal flowers with their use in childbirth, treatment of sexual ailments, and in sweatbath purification rites. For example, the white

Figure 6.6 Xochiquetzal seated in front of flowering Tree of Life in Tamoanchan. Note elaborate *quechquemitl*, quetzal headdress with butterflies, and butterfly nose ornament. After Codex Borgia (1963: Plate 9)

amaryllis and the poinsettia were both used for the treatment of genital diseases (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 2: 19; Book 5: 183).

Animals associated with Xochiquetzal included the quetzal bird, snakes, scorpions, butterflies, dogs, hummingbirds, centipedes, and ocelots (Quiñones Keber 1995: 187–188). The quetzal, a tropical macaw with long green tail feathers, was part of her name glyph as well as a synonym for "precious." Other associations were based on concepts of sexual promiscuity, renewal, and rebirth (Sullivan 1982). Hummingbirds were often used as magical talismans for bringing on fertility. Animals like the ocelot, coral snake, and scorpion, however, were a reminder of the malevolent side of Xochiquetzal's personality. The goddess is linked with scorpions in native folklore, where the lord Yappan was transformed into a scorpion after being seduced by Xochiquetzal (Ruíz de Alarcón 1982: 293–299). In seventeenth-century Morelos, healers called upon the goddess to help counteract the venom of a scorpion's sting while referring to the legend of Yappan.

Descriptions of Xochiquetzal come from Colonial Period accounts recorded by Catholic priests. The emphasis is on Xochiquetzal as a goddess of flowers, sexuality and childbirth, and artistic creation. Comparisons can be made to Venus/Aphrodite and Eve, and there is a sense of the Spanish elevating Xochiquetzal onto a pedestal to accentuate her benevolent qualities, while at the same time warning against the destructive aspects of uncontrolled female sexuality.

Xochiquetzal incarnate

An alternative perspective on Xochiquetzal is provided by consideration of the groups affiliated with the goddess, including artisans, healers, midwives, and harlots. Ethnohistorical evidence for these groups is embedded in many of the same sources that describe Xochiquetzal, but the tone of the narrative is less dogmatic and relevant information can therefore be ferreted out. Additional information is also supplied by illustrations from both pre- and post-Conquest pictorial manuscripts. As has been suggested in art historical analyses of Contact Period illustrations (e.g. Brown 1983; Quiñones Keber 1988), artists' representations often reflect a more "indigenous" perspective than the corresponding texts. Combining these two sources is thus a means of reconstructing the social organization of groups for whom Xochiquetzal was patroness, and thereby inferring the pre-Hispanic roles played by the goddess in religious ideology and in the negotiation of female gender identity.

Professional artisans enjoyed a relatively elevated status in Aztec society. Ethnohistorical documents recorded the advice of the Aztec ruler Mocteuczoma II, who told his children not directly in line for political succession that they should "learn well" the skills of artisans (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 8: 45). It can therefore be inferred that the artisan classes were closely related to the noble lineages, with many of the followers of Xochiquetzal familiar with the standards of elite society.

The crafts of spinning and weaving were closely associated with female identity, with women expected to be competent weavers (Figure 6.7; Sahagún 1950–82, Book 10: 96). Noble women were expected to exemplify this stereotype, and young women were admonished to emulate their behavior:

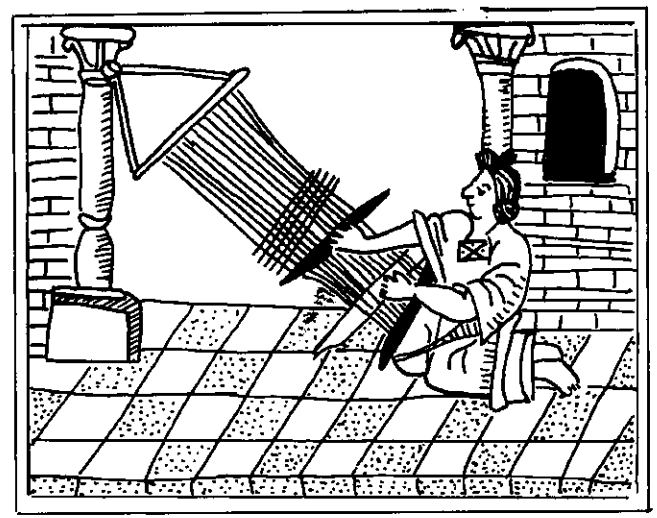

Figure 6.7 Mature woman weaving on backstrap loom. After Sahagún (1950–82, Book 10: Figure 21)

> Pay heed to, apply yourself to, the work of women, to the spindle, the batten. Watch carefully how your noblewomen, your ladies, our ladies, the noblewomen, who are artisans, who are craftswomen, dye [the thread], how they apply the dyes [to the thread], how the heddles are set, how the heddle leashes are fixed. . . . It is not your destiny, it is not your fate, to offer [for sale] in people's doorways, greens, firewood, strings of chiles, slabs of rock salt, for you are a noblewoman. [Thus], see to the spindle, the batten.
>
> (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 6: 96; in Sullivan 1982: 13–14)

At the birth of a girl child, the midwife immediately began the baby's indoctrination into a female identity by burying the umbilical cord beside the hearth (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 4: 3–4), as a symbol that the place of a woman was at the center of the household, and her tasks were "to prepare drink, to prepare food, to grind [maize flour], to spin, to weave" (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 6: 173). It should be noted that within Aztec society the hearth (*xictli*, literally "navel") was the symbolic center of the household, the *axis mundi* of the Aztec domestic landscape. At the bathing ceremony following the birth, newborn babies were presented with gifts in accordance with their social rank and gender identities (Figure 6.8). Girls received a spindle whorl, weaving batten, basket, spinning bowl, skeins of thread, and shuttle, with the skirt and tunic of female dress. Girls began to learn to spin by the age of 4, and by 12 they began to weave (Figure 6.9; Codex Mendoza 1992, vol. 3: folio 58r–60r; Sahagún 1950–82, Book 6: 201).

Expertise at spinning and weaving were highly regarded skills, to the extent that female slaves awaiting sacrifice would be given a spindle and fiber to spin, and if the woman showed exceptional ability at the domestic arts she could be spared from sacrifice to enter the royal household (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 9: 46). On the other hand, it was also believed that embroiderers who failed to observe religious rituals "lived in great vice and became terrible whores" (Sahagún 1950–

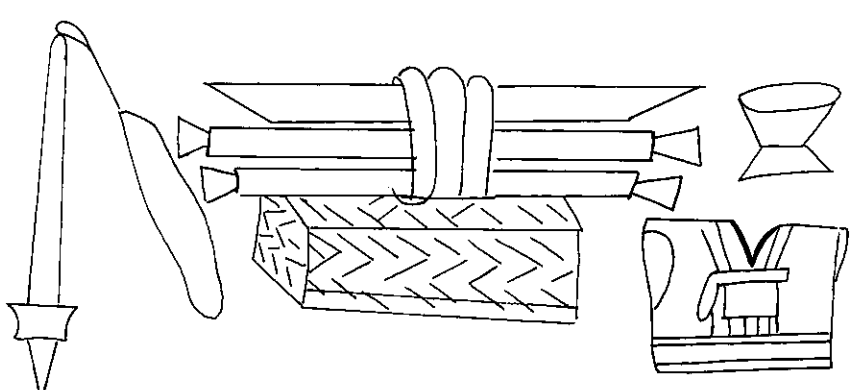

Figure 6.8 Gifts presented at bathing ceremony as symbols of female identity. After Sahagún (1950–82, Book 6: Figure 30)

Figure 6.9 Woman teaching daughter to weave. After Codex Mendoza (1992, vol. 3, folio 60r)

82, Book 4: 7). Xochiquetzal, as patroness of embroiderers, punished the non-penitent with "piles and infections."

Weaving was one of the most important avenues by which a woman could participate in the market economy (Brumfiel 1991; Hellbom 1967; McCafferty and McCafferty 1991) and women are repeatedly depicted selling their wares in the marketplace (Figure 6.10). Besides economic gain, good weavers gained prestige for their households through ritual gift giving of finely woven cloth. Gifts of textiles of different sizes and qualities often accompanied ceremonial participation, such as betrothals, births, funerals, or religious holidays (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 6: 129,196; see also Motolinía 1951: 132). Intensive production of woven goods was therefore essential to the acquisition and maintenance of social status. This would have been an important impetus for the practice of polygyny by the Aztec elite, who depended on multiple wives and their maid-servants to produce textiles in quantity (Motolinía 1951: 202; see also Durán 1971: 435).

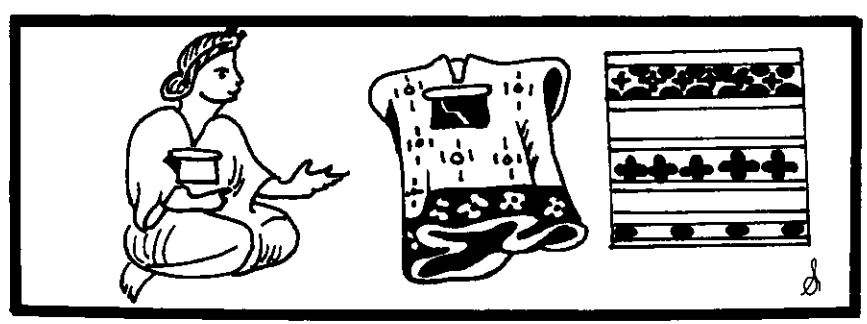

Figure 6.10 Woman selling capes in the marketplace. After Sahagún (1950–82, Book 10: Figure 120)

Temple compounds were established where women could perfect the skills of spinning and weaving, along with giving service to the gods (Clavijero 1976: 168; Motolinía 1951: 127–128). The Xochiquetzal temple was located within the Huitzilopochtli compound at the Aztec capital (Durán 1971: 240), and "Maidens of Penitence" lived as cloistered virgins where they performed ritual and domestic service (Figure 6.11; Durán 1971: 83–88). Life in the temple was carefully guarded, with priestesses to remain chaste and virtuous (but see p. 115). Time was spent learning the proper ways to worship the deities, with apprentices trained in songs, dances, and ceremonial rites. Temple priestesses also learned more arcane secrets, including practices used for healing, midwifery, divination, and sorcery.

In contrast, Xochiquetzal was also the patroness of harlots. During festivals in her honor in Tlaxcala, brightly dressed prostitutes and hermaphrodites paraded through the streets (Thompson 1933: 145–146). Women of "ill-repute" made a profound impression on the Spanish chroniclers (Arvey 1988). Sahagún (1950–82, Book 10: 55) described the harlot (*ahuiani*):

> She makes herself beautiful; she arrays herself; she is haughty. She appears like a flower [*mosuchiquetza*], looks gaudy, arrays herself gaudily; she views herself in a mirror – carries a mirror in her hand. She bathes; she takes a sweat bath; she washes herself; she anoints herself with *axin* [a yellowish unguent] – constantly anoints herself with *axin*. She lives like a bathed slave, acts like a sacrificial victim; she goes about with her head high – rude, drunk, shameless – eating mushrooms. She paints her face, variously paints her face; her face is covered with rouge, her cheeks are colored, her teeth are darkened – rubbed with cochineal. [Half] of her hair falls loose, half is wound around her head. She arranges her hair like horns.

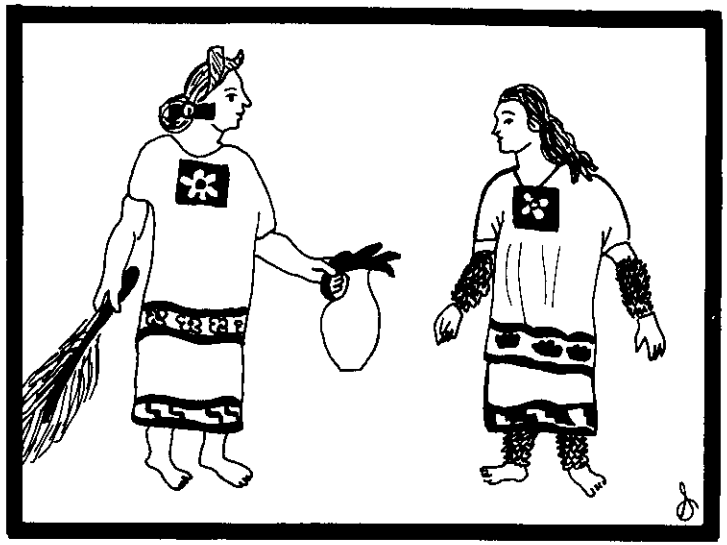

Figure 6.11 Aztec maidens from the temple school. After Durán (1971: Plate 6)

It is notable that the harlot is explicitly described as being *mosuchiquetza*, "like Xochiquetzal." This description of the harlot also parallels in many respects Sahagún's descriptions of the "bad" noblewomen (1950–82, Book 10: 45–50). Whereas "good" noblewomen were characterized through a wide variety of exemplary qualities, their wicked counterparts were "perverted," "gaudy," and "given to carnal pleasure." This distinction is further blurred through the contrasting descriptions of women's appearance in Sahagún's texts dealing with moral rhetoric (Book 6: 101) as opposed to noble practice (1950–82, Book 8: 47–48). The moral rhetoric instructs girls not to dress like *ahuianime*, yet elsewhere "esteemed" noble women were described with precisely those attributes.

Illustrations of harlots (Figure 6.12) continue this parallel; note also similarities to the "Maidens of Penitence" from the Xochiquetzal temple. A composite glyph of a foot over a three-petal flower is used to identify both the "good noblewoman" (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 10: Figure 98) and the "harlot" (ibid.: Figure 109). Harlots are also depicted with a spindle and female head as naming elements, perhaps in reference to symbols of female identity (Arvey 1988: 187); the head features the twin "horns" of hair characteristic of Xochiquetzal and, more generally, mature women. The figures hold flowers in their hands in reference to their use of flowers and herbs such as the *poyomatli* (also *poyomaxochitl*, *cacauaxochitl*) herb used as an aromatic narcotic (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 10: 56; Book 11: 202, 212). In all three illustrations the harlots are shown with water motifs, including shells, beneath their feet and in their hand. This may be in reference to the description that harlots "lived on the water" (ibid.: 56, 94); Durán (1971: 350, Plate 28) illustrates Chalchiucueye, goddess of the waters, kneeling on similar water symbols.[2]

While documentary sources regularly condemned harlots, little attention was devoted to the organization of the group. Noble girls could go to study in the temple schools (*calmecac*) but were warned not to enter the "place of courtesans,

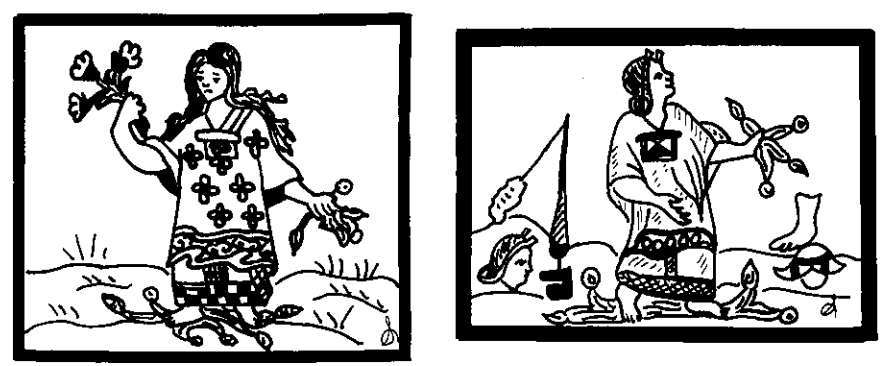

Figure 6.12 Aztec *ahuianime*. After Sahagún (1950–82, Book 10: Figures 107 and 109)

place of diversions" (*auilpan, camanalpan*; Sahagún 1950–82, Book 6: 216–217). There is some evidence that harlots (*ahuianime*) were affiliated with the female priesthood, since they participated in ceremonial rites of the goddess Toci alongside the healers and midwives (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 2: 118). *Ahuianime* were the attendants of deity impersonators destined for sacrifice and were rewarded by receiving all the precious belongings of the impersonator after his death (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 2: 169). During the feast of Toxcatl, an impersonator of Tezcatlipoca had "carnal relations" with a group of four women specially trained to represent members of the earth/fertility goddess complex – the leader of this group was identified as Xochiquetzal (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 2: 9, 69–70).

On the feast day of the lords, in the month of Uey tecuilhuitl, *ahuianime* ("pleasure girls") and *maauiltia* ("courtesans") emerged from the House of Song (*cuicacalli*) to dance with successful warriors and noblemen.[3] After the ceremony, matrons (*tlauhtiloya*) gathered up the women at which time the noblemen and teachers offered gifts in order to take the dancers home for the night (Figure 6.13; Sahagún 1950–82, Book 2: 96–103). In a separate ceremony known as the Etzalqualiztli, "pleasure girls" and warriors danced from door to door asking for offerings of *etzalli* (a mixture of corn and beans) (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 2: 84).

Ahuianime who travelled with the armies, maintaining the camps, cooking, and presumably performing other "services" (Salas 1990: 9–10), may have also been associated with Xochiquetzal. There is some evidence that women also served as warriors among the Aztecs and other Mesoamerican groups (McCafferty and McCafferty 1994a). It was recorded that Tlatelolcan women defended their city against the Aztec army (Durán 1994: 260; also Klein 1994), and Tepanec

Figure 6.13 Temple matron arranging match between man and *ahuianime*. After Sahagún (1950–82, Book 10: Figure 146)

warriors in female costume are shown in battle (Durán 1994: Plate 11). The Codex Mendoza illustrates tribute of military costumes from the Huaxteca with distinctively female elements, including spindles in the headdress and crescent-shaped nose ornaments; note also that these are the only costumes that lack loincloths (Codex Mendoza 1992, vol. 3: 45, folio 19r).

Another role of the *ahuiani* was to incite the young warriors to go into battle, by taunting the more reticent (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 2: 81). Valiant women may have even had a non-combatant role on the battlefield, where they "coached and cheered on their warrior mates" (Salas 1990: 7, citing Torquemada 1723, vol. 2: 299). In this role *ahuianime* paralleled Xochiquetzal, urging soldiers into battle while at the same time protecting and caring for them.

Xochiquetzal/Itzpapalotl in her role as primordial warrior provided a bridge into the predominantly male realm of war. Success in battle was one of the primary means available to men for gaining status in Aztec society. Metaphorically, blood gushing from a wound was equated with a flower blooming, and the glyphic elements for "flower" and "heart" are sometimes identical (Berlo 1983). Xochiquetzal as goddess of flowers, then, was also a goddess of war, urging soldiers into battle while at the same time protecting Aztec warriors. The "Flowery Wars" of the Aztec Triple Alliance were designed specifically to capture victims for sacrifice, to offer up the flowers/hearts to the sun.

When women gave birth, the midwife would let out a shout, to be heard by all in the community, that the woman had been like a brave warrior and taken a prisoner, a baby. Women that died in childbirth (*mocihuaquetzque*, literally "quetzal women") were given a place of honor in Aztec society (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 2: 37–38), structurally equivalent to warriors who died in battle (Kellogg 1988). It was believed that these corpses had magical powers, and warriors tried to cut locks of hair and the middle finger from the deceased to carry into battle for luck (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 6: 161–163). Thieves believed that the forearm could be used to paralyze victims during robberies. To prevent the dismemberment of female heroines, it is little wonder that the midwives/priestesses banded together to protect the corpses, taking up their "little shields" (*tehuehuele*) and weaving swords for defense.

Priestesses affiliated with the earth/fertility complex were powerful in their knowledge and control over fertility and childbirth. Herbal medicine, magical charms, and prayers could be used to either bring on or prevent pregnancy (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 1: 4–5). Other methods were known to cause or prevent miscarriage, to ensure easy childbirth, and to facilitate lactation (ibid., Book 6: 159). Since bearing children was an important way for women to gain prestige within pre-Columbian society, control over reproduction was an arena for the negotiation of power in gender relations.[4]

This can be further seen through metaphors for sexual reproduction relating to spinning and weaving. As Thelma Sullivan (1982) described it:

> Spinning goes through stages of growth and decline, waxing and waning, similar to those of a child-bearing woman. The spindle set in the spindle

> whorl is symbolic of coitus, and thread, as it winds around the spindle, symbolizes the growing fetus. . . . Weaving, too, the intertwining of threads, is symbolic of coitus, and thus spinning and weaving represent life, death, and rebirth in a continuing cycle that characterizes the essential nature of the Mother Goddess.
>
> (Sullivan 1982: 14)

The Spanish chronicler Bernardino de Sahagún recorded the Aztec riddle: "What is it that they make pregnant, that they make big with child in the dancing place?" The answer, spindles, again refers to the ball of thread winding around the spindle shaft, while the "dancing place" refers to the little bowl where the end of the spindle shaft rests during supported spinning (Book 6: 239–40; in Sullivan 1982).

Sexual reproduction and domestic production were the two principal avenues available for pre-Columbian women to acquire status within Aztec society. The metaphorical blending of sexual symbolism with spinning and weaving suggests that control over these resources was consciously manipulated by women to maximize social power. Analyses of material culture from archaeological contexts, such as spindle whorls and weaving battens, indicate that stylistic representations on these implements emphasized associations with female supernaturals and related resources of female power (McCafferty and McCafferty 1991, 1994b). The material culture of spinning and weaving played an active symbolic role in reifying female identity and asserting claims to power and prestige.

Parallel structures equated the male and female activities of battle and reproduction. Spinning and weaving implements were used symbolically to continue this metaphor (McCafferty and McCafferty 1991). The weaving batten, a long flat piece of wood used as part of the back-strap loom, was commonly referred to as a weaving sword (Berdan 1988). The goddess Xochiquetzal was depicted with a batten as a symbol of her authority in the *Codex Telleriano Remensis* (Quiñones Keber 1995: 187–188), as was Cihuacoatl in the *Florentine Codex* and *Primeros Memoriales* (Figure 6.14; Sahagún 1950–82, Book 1: 3; 1993: folio 264r). Battens were also used in ritual contexts to "sacrifice" dough idols made of amaranth seeds (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 2: 29). Ethnographically, we have witnessed weavers using their wooden battens like a *machete* to crack open coconuts!

Clay spindle whorls were often decorated with mold-made impressions closely resembling the patterns of battle shields, including shields carried by female deities of the earth/fertility complex. Many other whorls include floral motifs, possibly evoking Xochiquetzal either in her role as patroness of weavers or as primordial warrior. Spindle whorls may be what the chroniclers referred to as "small shields" (*tehuehuele*) that women would use in battle and in childbirth (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 6: 154). *Teueuellis* were described as small enough that "all the little shields [could] rest in thy hand" (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 6: 97). The idea of a small clay whorl does not take on ominous proportions until

Figure 6.14 Goddess Cihuacoatl holding weaving batten. After Codex Magliabechiano (1983: Plate 45)

one considers the sharply pointed wooden spindle that passes through the hole, effectively becoming an eighteen-inch hat pin.

A final group that was affiliated with Xochiquetzal and her priestesses were dwarfs (*tzapatl*), hunchbacks (*tepotzli*), and others with deformities. It was believed that through these intermediaries supernatural power was channeled. Birth defects were interpreted as a sign from the goddess, and dwarfs and hunchbacks were often retained as servants for the nobility (Durán 1971: 122, 271–272; Sahagún 1950–82, Book 8: 30). These may have been equated with the *xolotls*, mythical creatures affiliated with Xochiquetzal. Literally, "*xolotl*" means "servant" and "page," and therefore is a suitable description for the role of dwarves and hunchbacks in the service of the nobility. The god Xolotl was the deformed twin

of Quetzalcoatl (Brundage 1982), and a further implication of *xolotl* therefore relates to individuals suffering from syphilitic deformities, relating to the syphilitic god Nanahuatzin, an avatar of Xolotl.

Syphilis may have been a relatively common disease in pre-Columbian Mexico that spread to Europe shortly after the Conquest. In addition to causing open sores, untreated syphilis can cause crippling bone disease ("charcot joint"), birth defects, blindness, and high prenatal and maternal mortality (CIBA 1971). Charcot joint is the result of the deterioration of load-bearing long bones, and can cause the distal end of the tibia to disarticulate from the foot. As noted above, birth abnormalities were interpreted as being caused by the goddess, but they could also be the result of the *cihuateteo*, deified women affiliated with Xochiquetzal who died in childbirth and returned to earth to cause mischief (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 1: 19; Sullivan 1982: 18–19). Interestingly, *cihuateteo/ahuiateteo* are depicted in the Codex Borgia with oddly deformed ankles, possibly an indication of the syphilitic bone disease (Figure 6.15), and with eye deformities similar to that

Figure 6.15 Cihuateteo (deified woman). Note deformed eyes and ankles. After Codex Borgia (1963: Plate 47)

shown on Nanahuatzin (Codex Borgia, 1963: Plate 10). The complementary name for these supernaturals, *ahuiateteo*, suggests a close relationship with the "pleasure girls" affiliated with the priestesses of Xochiquetzal.

Conclusion

The portrayal of Xochiquetzal as patroness of harlots, gaudily dressed, clacking her bitumen gum loudly, full of vice and crippled with syphilis, is a far cry from the original description of a young woman, the essence of sensual femininity. How should we rectify this discrepancy? Should we accept the prejudiced interpretations of the medieval Spanish priests, relying as they did on the opinions of Aztec elite males. We think not! The overwhelming male bias of the ethnohistoric record does more to *prescribe* proper behavior than to *describe* alternative female roles.

Instead, we see Xochiquetzal as an ideological figurehead for women's roles in contrast to male activities and thus a focus for the negotiation of female power. Women that affiliated themselves with the goddess participated in an alternative discourse that was not congruent with the dominant culture of the Aztecs. These women – healers, midwives, weavers, and harlots – accentuated the traditional resources of female power, sexual reproduction and domestic production, to augment their own social status. Through the concepts of religious duality and parallelism, a potential existed for structural equality, and through such means as the symbolic use of weaving "weapons" this identity was projected.

Xochiquetzal was presented as an ideal for Aztec womanhood. Yet the problem arises: whose ideal? In the "official" histories collected by the Spanish chroniclers, the goddess fulfills the needs of a dominant male ideology as subservient, domestic, and willing. Intertwined throughout the chronicles, however, are hints, based largely on the women's groups that were associated with the goddess, that a different ideal may have existed, with a distinctly female agenda. Xochiquetzal may have been on a pedestal for the male elite, but she was a focal point for Aztec women seeking to negotiate their own place in society.

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Notes

1 The "adultery flower" (*teccizuacalxochitl, tetlaxincaxochitl*) raised by Aztec palace women even had a functional use relating to its phallic form, and Mocteuczoma's concubines caught using the flower "in place of a virile [male] member" were stoned (Durán 1994: 52 n. 3, from Hernández 1959–60: II: 390; also Sahagún 1950–82, Book 11: 209).

2 Sahagún describes water merchants who also "lived on the water" and sacrificed a female slave to the goddess of the waters (1950–82, Book 1: 22).

3 Seler (1963: 23) notes that the *ahuianime* lived in the *cuicacalli* and were the "companions" of single warriors living in the *telpochcalli*, the house of youths. Sahagún added (1950–82, Book 3: 59):

> And these youths [in the *telpochcalli*] had their paramours (*ynmecaoan*) by twos, by threes. Perchance one was in her own house, perchance several lay scattered. And when, they said, youth was laid down, he paid his debt. In order to leave, the youth left large cotton capes, perhaps ten, perhaps twenty if he was rich.

4 Youths were warned by their fathers to avoid eating things given by "whores and harlots" (*cioatlaueliloque in auianime*), since they could include potions such as *maçacoatl* (made from a particular species of snake: Sahagún 1950–82, Book 11: 80), that caused heightened sex drive to the point that they would become dehydrated from continuous ejaculation and "die of lasciviousness" (Sahagún 1950–82, Book 6: 125–126).

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