

## 2

# The World View of Balance: The Cosmic Tree and the Four Quarters

Carry me to your tree of the dead  
carry me to your tree of water  
carry me to your blazing tree  
carry me to your tree of the sun."<sup>1</sup>

On an early morning around the year 1300, a Chichimec warrior named Xolotl ("Divine Dog") ascended a mountain on the edge of the Basin of Mexico and carried out two rituals that signified that his people were establishing their new community in Cemanahuac. Xolotl stood at a point where he had a full view of the valleys below and shot four arrows, one each toward the four directions of the world. The flight and landing site of these four arrows marked the organized territory that Xolotl's people would now occupy. Then, along with his helpers he collected some dried grasses and had them woven into the shape of a large ring. A prayer was sung, the grass ring was set on fire, and the ashes were scattered to the four directions of the world. It was understood that the symbols and actions carried out by the warrior-leader meant that the people had arrived in the new territory they could call home. He had ritually mapped out their new living space.

This seemingly simple event is a good way to begin a study of the general picture of the world, or *world view*, of the Aztec peoples, which affected *every aspect of their lives*. Aztec peoples lived their daily lives and interacted with one another according to the world view outlined in this

directions; the grasses of the earth transformed by fire into ashes scattered among the four directions and into smoke that ascended into heaven; and all this taking place on a mountain, a place linking the sky, the earth, and the underworld. This chapter will explore the Aztec world view by focusing on five major questions:

1. How was the world created?
2. How was the world organized?
3. Who were the major gods, and what were their powers?
4. What was the general purpose and meaning of sacrifice?
5. What was the shape of time and the calendar?

By answering these questions, we, like Xolotl, may be able to perceive the organization of the Aztec cosmos and come to appreciate its importance in their daily lives.

### HOW WAS THE WORLD CREATED?

One Latin American writer said, "There are only two stories really worth writing about: someone leaves home or a stranger comes to town." The Aztecs, like all peoples, told and retold the story of their ancestors, the Chichimecs, who left a primordial home, traveled across an expansive terrain filled with hardships and losses, and finally arrived in a fertile valley where they could build a new community. We will examine this migration story in some detail. But there is an even earlier story of how the world in which they were born and traveled was created and given a basic order. Let us first review that cosmic adventure.

Fortunately, an image on the famous Aztec Calendar Stone refers to the Aztec view of the creation of the cosmos. In the center of the stone is carved the image of the five "ages" or "suns" through which the universe passed prior to the great migration of the Chichimecs. It is interesting that this stone image of the myth of the five ages conforms to the earlier story of Xolotl dividing the new territory into five sections. At least one Nahuatl text about the five ages of the world begins by stating, "Here is the oral account of what is known of how the earth was founded long ago." The First Age, or First Sun, had its beginning over three thousand years ago and was called 4 Jaguar. That age lasted 676 years, during which the different gods did battle to gain ascendancy, and then ocelots descended on the people and devoured them in a ravenous battle. The First Sun was destroyed and the cosmos was in darkness. Then the Second Sun, called 4 Wind, was created, and it lasted 364 years. The gods battled again before huge winds came and destroyed the homes, trees—everything—and the sun was also carried away by the storm. Then the Third Sun was created and called 4 Rain, which really



Mexica ancestor, perhaps Xolotl, with bow and arrows. (Diego Durán, *Códice Durán*. Mexico City: Arrendadora Internacional 1990 facsimile edition.)

chapter. As we shall see, the Aztec world was understood to be a grand horizontal disk intersected by an immense vertical shaft. The horizontal disk was believed to be surrounded by sea waters and raised up on its outer edges to form the walls that held up the sky. This disk (sometimes pictured as a rectangle) was organized into five major sections, with four quarters of the world and the *axis mundi*, or navel of the world. The center is depicted in one manuscript as a precious green stone that unites the four petals of a gigantic flower. The vertical shaft was conceived of as a series of layers of heaven, earth, and the underworld joined together by the *axis mundi*—the central sacred shrine of the Great Temple in the heart of the capital, Tenochtitlan. Each of these layers was divided into two opposing pairs, which represented the crucial idea of duality that permeated all elements of the Aztec world. In Xolotl's rituals we see the confluence of all of these ideas—the horizontal, the vertical, the four quarters, the center, and duality—with Xolotl's arrows defining the four



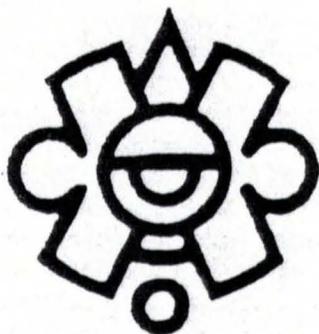
Close-up of the center of the Aztec Calendar Stone depicting the four previous ages of creation and destruction around the central image of Tonatiuh, the sun deity presiding over the Fifth Age, in which the Aztecs lived. (Courtesy of Salvador Guil'liem Arroyo, INAH.)

meant rain of fire. Again there was a dramatic confrontation among the gods, and the people were destroyed again, this time by fire, which rained for a whole day. The sun was also burned up and the cosmos was in darkness once again. Then the Fourth Sun, called 4 Water, was created; it lasted for fifty-two years before the heavens collapsed and the waters swallowed up everything, including the mountains. Finally, the Fifth Sun, the age in which the Aztecs dwelled, was created. It was called 4 Movement, which meant two things. On the one hand, it meant that the sun would move in an orderly fashion across the heavens. On the other hand, it meant that the age would end when the earth moved violently. It was feared in Aztec times that their age would be destroyed by colossal earthquakes. We can feel the tension of Aztec worry when we look at the details of the following story of how their age, the Fifth Sun, was created.

The world was dark and without movement at the end of the Fourth Sun when the gods gathered in a place called Teotihuacan, the Abode of the Gods. The gods gathered around a fire that gave them warmth, and they contemplated how to re-create the sun, the world, and life. It was decided that one of the gods must sacrifice himself by hurling himself into the fire, out of which the sun would be born. The gods debated among themselves about who would make the ultimate sacrifice.

Then the gods spoke: they said to Tecuciztecatl, "Now, Tecuciztecatl, enter the fire!" Then he prepared to throw himself into the enormous fire. He felt the great heat and he was afraid. Being afraid, he dared not hurl himself in, but turned back instead. . . . Four times he tried, four times he failed. After these failures, the gods then spoke to Nanahuatzin, and they said to him: "You Nanahuatzin, you try!" And as the gods had spoken, he braced himself, closed his eyes, stepped forward, and hurled himself into the fire. The sound of roasting was heard, his body crackled noisily. Seeing him burn thus in the blazing fire, Tecuciztecatl also leaped into the fire.<sup>12</sup>

Then the "gods sat waiting to see where Nanahuatzin would come to rise—he who fell first into the fire—in order that he might shine as the sun. In order that dawn might break." The gods sat for a long time looking in all directions, and a reddening of dawn appeared in all directions. But there was confusion because the gods did not know from which direction the sun would rise. "They expected that he might rise in all directions, because the light was everywhere." This confusion about the direction of the sunrise is solved by one of the gods, Quetzalcoatl ("Feathered Serpent"), who faces east and is imitated by other gods, including the Red Tezcatlipoca. And the sun rose in the east. "When it



Ollin symbol representing  
earthquake or movement.  
(Courtesy of INAH.)

appeared, it was flaming red . . . no one was able to look at it: its light was brilliant and blinding, its rays were magnificently diffused in all directions."<sup>13</sup>

But there was a problem. The sun did not move across the sky but rather "kept swaying from side to side." Faced with this partial sunrise and the crisis of no heavenly movement, the gods decided to sacrifice themselves. "Let this be, that through us the sun may be revived. Let all of us die." They cast themselves into the fire, but still the sun did not move, and the age or sun named 4 Movement did not begin. Only Ehecatl, the wind god, was left, so he "exerted himself fiercely and violently as he blew" the sun into motion across the sky. The dawn had truly come, and the orderly universe was created!

What do you make of this amazing story? First, it is important that, as with the other four ages of the world, it is very hard to get *stability and order* in the universe. The orderly flow of the sun is achieved only after extreme efforts. Second, this long struggle to bring the world into order and motion depends on sacrifices, real sacrifices of the gods, who give their lives so that the sun will move across the heavens. This involves violence, which, paradoxically, according to the believers in these myths, results in creation. The sun is created out of death, and even that is not quite enough. The last god, Ehecatl, must exert himself to the fullest. Finally, and this is a key point to understanding the expectations that Aztec peoples carried around during their days and nights, the universe was filled with a pessimistic tone. The myth of the four suns ends, "And as the elders continue to say, under this sun there will be earthquakes and hunger, and then our end shall come." The world view was

of a universe that was dynamic, unstable, and one day doomed to collapse. As one of the great poets sang in the festivals of the capital city:

It is not true, it is not true  
that we came to live here.  
We came only to sleep, only to dream.

In fact, it was in a dream that the Chichimec ancestors of the Aztecs received their marching orders to migrate in search of a new home.

## THE MIGRATION STORY

The image on the national flag of Mexico shows a huge eagle fighting and eating a serpent while perched on a blooming cactus growing from a rock. This powerful image refers to the other great story of origins that was told and retold to Aztec children, teenagers, and adults about their ancestors. Over twenty accounts of the Mexica migration story have come down to us from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. And just as the story of the creation of the Fifth Sun in Teotihuacan emphasizes one of the powerful places in Aztec memory, the Abode of the Gods, so the story of the Aztecs leaving their homes in Aztlan and traveling to their new city of Tenochtitlan emphasizes the importance of certain sacred places.

When the Spaniards began to listen to the native survivors talk about their own sacred history, they heard many versions of the Aztec migration story. This story told that the Mexica left their primordial homeland of Aztlan ("Place of the White Heron") and Chicomoztoc ("Place of Seven Caves") and took a long journey in search of a new home. The people were led by a shaman/priest who had a dream in which he was ordered by the tribal god to leave Aztlan and travel with his people until they witnessed the god's sign of their new home. The sign would be the giant eagle on the cactus. Following the great dream, the Chichimec leader spoke to the community and told them that they needed to leave the Place of Seven Caves and travel until they saw that a

prickly pear cactus standing upon a rock . . . has grown . . . so tall and luxuriant that a fine eagle has made his nest there. When we discover it we shall be fortunate, for there we shall find our rest, our comfort, our grandeur. There our name will be praised and our Aztec nation made great. The might of our arms will be known and the courage of our brave hearts. . . . We shall become lords of gold and silver, of jewels and precious stones, of splendid feathers and of the insignia [that distinguish lords and chieftains]. . . . Our god orders us to call this place Tenochtitlan. There will be built the city

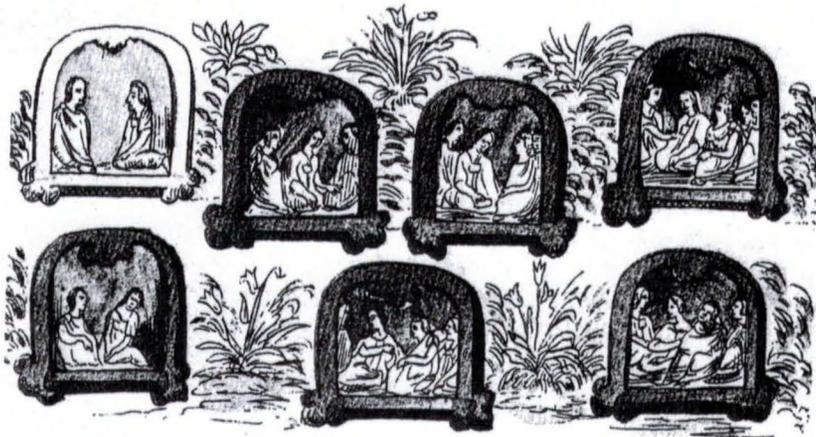


This sixteenth-century image, depicting the founding of Tenochtitlan, is very similar to the one found today in the center of the Mexican national flag. (Diego Durán, *Códice Durán*. Mexico City: Arrendadora Internacional 1990 facsimile edition.)

that is to be queen, that is to rule over all others in the country. There we shall receive other kings and nobles, who will recognize Tenochtitlan as the supreme capital.<sup>14</sup>

In this speech we see some of the major social themes of the Aztec world view: (1) the human world is ruled by gods who communicate their wishes to priest/shamans, (2) the Aztecs were destined to leave home and travel to find the greatest city in the known world, (3) they were to be great warriors, and (4) they were to find abundant riches.

The story goes on to tell that Huitzilopochtli was a fierce god who drove the Mexica on a long march for several years to many places where they built shrines in his honor. The Mexica, the story tells us, were only one of at least eight Nahuatl-speaking groups who left their homeland in the arid north to seek fertile lands in the Great Basin of Mexico. At some places on the march, the people settled for many years and had many adventures, conflicts, battles, and religious experiences. When the Aztecs finally found their prickly pear cactus in the middle of Lake Tez-



Mexica ancestors emerge from Chicomoztoc, the "Place of the Seven Caves."  
(Diego Durán, *Códice Durán*. Mexico City: Arrendadora Internacional 1990 facsimile edition.)

coco and saw Huitzilopochtli in the form of an eagle, "with his wings stretched outward like the rays of the sun," they humbled themselves, and the god "humbled himself, bowing his head low in their direction." Some versions tell that the great eagle held a bird in his mouth, whereas others say it was a snake. The Mexica marked the site and then rejoiced

and rested before their first community action—the construction of a shrine to the god Huitzilopochtli, which, as we shall see, became the greatest temple in the entire empire.

Another version of the arrival in the lake region of the Basin of Mexico says that one of the priests who saw the eagle dove into the lake and disappeared. When he failed to surface, his companions thought that he had drowned, and they returned to their camp. Later, the priest returned and announced that he had descended into the underworld, where he met the rain god Tlaloc, spoke with him, and was granted permission for the Mexica to settle in this sacred place. Thus we have both the forces of the sky (the eagle, Huitzilopochtli) and of the earth (the lake god, Tlaloc) granting permission to build the new center of the world.

### HOW WAS THE WORLD ORGANIZED?

The Aztec universe, like most Mesoamerican peoples' world views, had a geometry consisting of three general levels: an overworld, or celestial space; the middleworld, or earthly level; and the underworld, sometimes known as Mictlan ("Place of the Dead"). In some cases, a World Tree joined these three levels; its roots were in the underworld, its trunk was in the middleworld, and its highest branches reached up into the celestial world. In the celestial realm above the earth there were thirteen levels (some sources say nine), each inhabited by diverse gods and supernatural beings, often depicted as conjugal pairs. Each level had a certain color, power, and name. Here is a list of celestial levels and gods:

Omeyocan, Place of Duality [Levels 12 and 13]

The God Who Is Red

The God Who Is Yellow

The God Who Is White

The Place that Has Corners of Obsidian Slabs

The Sky that Is Blue-Green

The Sky that Is Blackish

The Sky Where Gyration Occurs

The Sky-Place of Salt

The Sky of the Sun

The Sky of the Skirt of Stars

The Sky of Tlalocan and the Moon

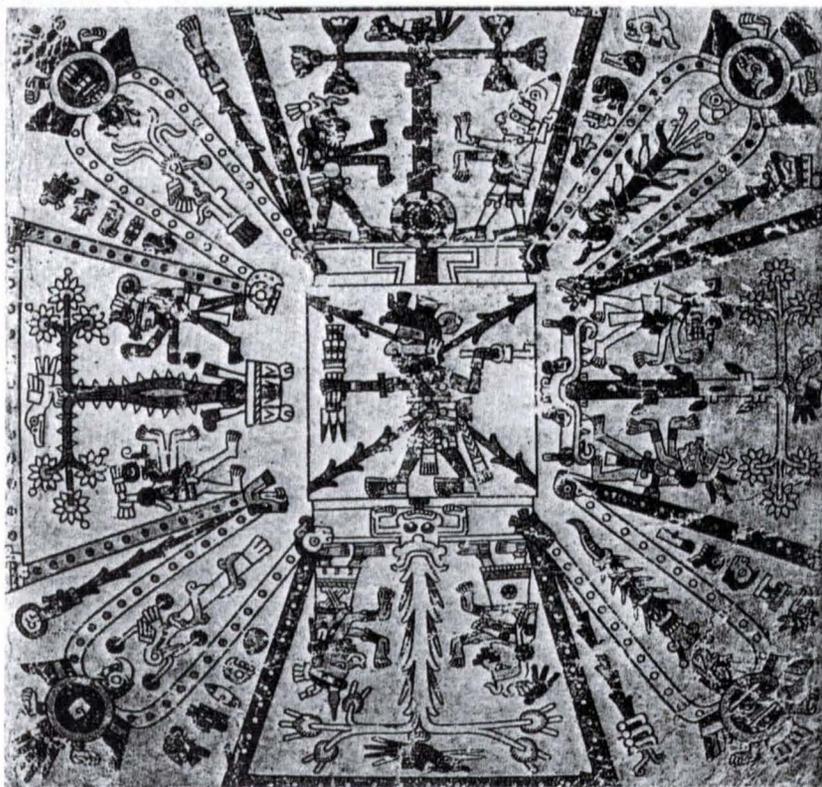
Each of these thirteen levels was inhabited by powerful gods and minor supernatural beings. The gods usually came in pairs, reflecting the other major pattern of the Aztec universe: cosmic duality. There was a pervasive dual opposition of contrary elements working in all things. As Alfredo López Austin, the brilliant Mexican anthropologist, notes, "Sky and earth, heat and cold, light and darkness, man and woman, strength and weakness, above and below, rain and drought are conceived at the same time to be polar and complementary pairs, their elements interrelated by their opposition as contraries in one of the great divisions and by their arrangement in an alternating sequence of dominance."<sup>15</sup> As will become apparent when we discuss the character of the human body, this duality was a key concept in Aztec notions of illness, medicine, and healing.

Below this celestial column of gods, forces, colors, and dualities floated the four-quartered earth in the sacred waters. And below the earth were the nine levels of the underworld:

- The Place for Crossing the Water
- The Place Where the Hills Are Found
- The Obsidian Mountain
- The Place of the Obsidian Wind
- The Place Where the Banners Are Raised
- The Place Where People Are Pierced with Arrows
- The Place Where People's Hearts Are Devoured
- The Obsidian Place of the Dead
- The Place Where Smoke Has No Outlet

These nine levels served as way stations for the souls of the dead as they passed slowly toward the bottom rung. As with the celestial world, the terrestrial levels were occupied by gods and minor supernatural forces who were capable of escaping into the earthly level and influencing daily life.

In some versions of this universe there were four other trees, giant *ceiba* trees that held up the sky at the four quarters of the world. These trees were also the main entry points of the gods and their influences from the upper and lower worlds onto the surface of the earth and into the world of humans. These influences and forces radiated along lines of communication between the four quarters and the central section, where the old god, the lord of fire, transformed all things. In a cosmic image from a manuscript painted by native peoples before the Europeans arrived, the universe is divided into five major sections, with four trapezoidal sections, each representing one of the four quarters of the uni-



This image from the *Codex Fejérváry-Mayer* is both a divinatory calendar and a map of the cosmos. (Courtesy of Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, Graz, Austria, 1971 facsimile edition.)

verse, arranged around a center space. In the central square is a warrior armed with his weapons while streams of blood flow into the four quarters of the universe. Each of the four quarters has a blooming tree emerging out of a different symbol; on top of each tree is a different bird, perched but alert. This combination of symbol, tree, and bird is reproduced in the image of the founding of the Aztec city, where the giant eagle sits atop a blooming cactus that is growing out of a rock in the water.

On each side of these celestial trees two gods face one another in different kinds of ritual poses. This pattern reflects the Aztec notion of duality, mentioned earlier, repeated in each of the four quarters of the universe. In addition to celestial tree, each of the four quarters also has

two gods who are responsible for their quadrant's well-being and balance.

Besides the great trees, which served as conduits for sacred energy—the sacred forces erupted from the trees every moment of the day—and flowing across the landscape, there were fountains, forest, and caves, all of which were considered openings by which the supernatural forces entered and escaped the social world of humans. Also, sunlight, fire, stones, and animals were considered openings for the powers of gods to enter the world. These openings were sometimes referred to as *malinalli*, or two pairs of intertwined bands flowing in constant motion that helped the forces of the underworld rise to the surface and the forces of the celestial world descend to the earth.

### THE MAJOR GODS AND THEIR POWERS

We have seen that gods played a major role in the Aztec creation story and the stories of migration. But who were these gods, and what powers did they have for these Mesoamerican peoples? Another question to consider is, How do *you* think about God or gods, what are they, and what powers do they have? This is important because we now know that one of the biggest conflicts that European peoples had with native Americans was over their different views and practices concerning gods.

The Aztecs had what can be called a pantheon—a world with many gods. There was a supreme creator deity, Ometeotl, or “the Giver of Life,” who was a dual god consisting of the pair Ometecuhtli and Omecihuatl. This god was celestial and androgynous (both male and female) and was the primordial creator of the universe. Like the God of certain Western traditions, this god was omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent—all-powerful, all-knowing, and present everywhere. The male aspect was especially found in fire, in the sun, and in all the corn gods, who ensured the growth of corn. The female aspect was in the plants, the water, and the earth and ensured regeneration. A song that reflects the multipresences and powers of this dual god goes like this:

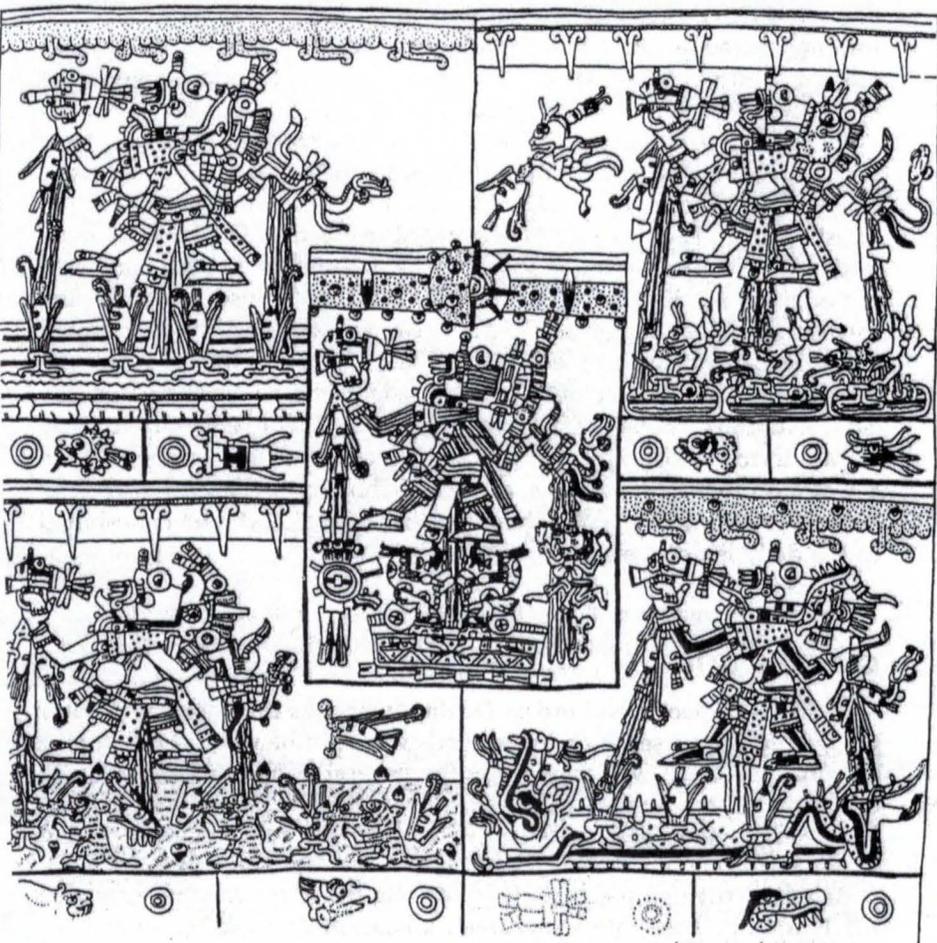
He is the Lord and Lady of Duality  
He is Lord and Lady of our maintenance  
He is mother and father of the gods, the old god  
He is at the same time the god of fire, who dwells in the  
    navel of fire  
He is the mirror of day and night  
He is the star which illumines all things, and he is the Lady  
    of the shining skirt of stars  
He is our mother, our father  
Above all, he is Ometeotl who dwells in the place of  
    duality, Omeyocan.<sup>16</sup>

Before we get deeper into the pantheon, it is important to realize that there were scores of gods associated with all aspects of existence. This was because all of life was considered inherently sacred and literally filled with the potency of divine beings. These gods were expressions of the sacred powers that permeated the world. References to these numinous forces were expressed in the Nahuatl term *teotl*, which the Spaniards translated as "god," "saint," or "demon." But to the Aztecs, *teotl* signified a sacred power manifested in natural forms (such as a tree, a mountain, or a rainstorm), in persons of high distinction (such as a king, an ancestor, or a warrior), or in mysterious and chaotic places (such as caves, whirlpools, or storms). What the Spanish translated as "god" really referred to a broader spectrum of sacred powers and forces that animated the world.

Fortunately, the deities were represented in story, pictorially, and in sculpture as anthropomorphic beings. Even when gods took an animal form, as in the case of Xolotl, the divine dog, or the form of a ritual object, as in the case of Iztli, the knife god, they often had human features like arms, legs, a torso, a face, and so on. Many of these gods dwelt in the different levels of the thirteen-layered celestial sphere or the nine-layered underworld. Remember what we said about the four-quartered cosmos? That pattern also organized the pantheon. In many cases there were quadruple or quintuple groups of gods. For instance, in one of the remaining storybooks, the *Codex Borgia*, Tlaloc (the rain god) inhabits the central region of heaven, while four other Tlaloque inhabit the four regions of the sky, each dispensing a different kind of rain.

To understand how these gods, especially the creator gods, acted, consider this story of Quetzalcoatl traveling through the different sacred regions of the universe in order to re-create human life. It shows one of the major powers of Aztec gods—the power to create or destroy life.

At the end of the Fourth Sun, when no humans were alive and the process of re-creating the world was under way, one of the gods, Quetzalcoatl, dove into the underworld in search of the bones of the ancestors. He traveled through the eight layers of the underworld and arrived at the ninth—Mictlan—where he announced that "the gods are anxious that someone should inhabit the earth." He was confronted with Mictlantecuhtli and Mictecacihuatl, the Lord and Lady of the Region of the Dead. Quetzalcoatl told them, "I have come in search of the precious bones in your possession," and they put him to several tests. First, the Lord of Mictlan replied, "Very well, sound my shell horn and go around my circular realm four times." But the shell horn had no holes, so Quetzalcoatl called the worms, who made holes. Then the bees flew through the horn and it sounded. Mictlantecuhtli informed him that he could take the bones of the ancestors away, but told his assistants not to let Quet-



Tlaloc and four Tlaloque making rain. (*Codex Borgia*, courtesy of Siglo Veintiuno Editores, Mexico.)

zalcoatl escape with them. Quetzalcoatl searched for the bones and found them. He gathered them up in his pouch and began to slip out of Mictlan. As he walked along a trail, a flock of quail suddenly emerged from the grasses and startled him. He fell into a pit and dropped the bones, which broke into many pieces upon which the quail began to gnaw. Because of this, the new humans would be created in many different sizes. Although Quetzalcoatl was killed in the fall, he had the power to regenerate his life. He managed to escape with the bones and traveled to one of the Aztec paradises, Tamoanchan, where he gave them to Cihuacoatl,

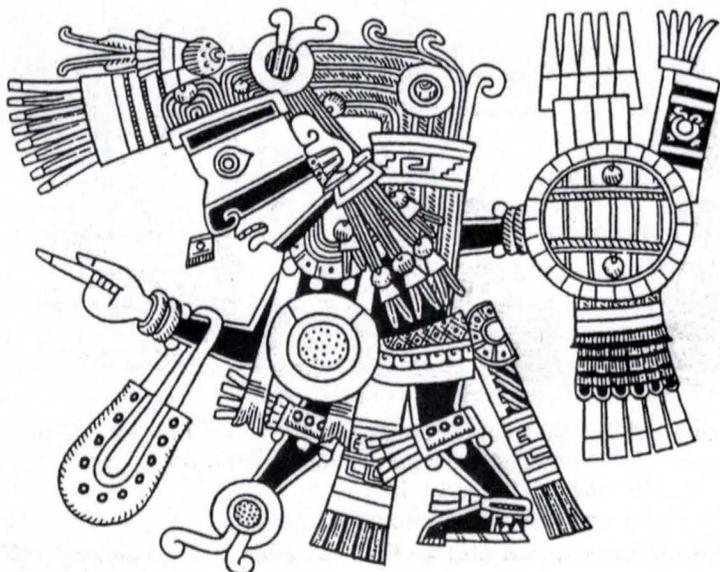
"the Serpent Woman." She ground them up into a paste and put them into her sacred jar. Blood was poured on them and human life was re-created. And the two of them said, "People have been born, o gods, the *macehualtin* (those given life or deserved into life through penance)."<sup>17</sup>

We see some of the special powers of the gods in this story. First, they cross and inhabit the different regions of the world—Quetzalcoatl starts on the earthly level, descends into the underworld, and ascends to the celestial world. Second, as a messenger of re-creation, Quetzalcoatl must undergo a trial in the underworld. We know that in Maya cosmology, the underworld, Xibalba, is filled with a series of "houses" in which the travelers undergo magical trials that can freeze, burn, or dismember them. Third, the gods come in pairs. There is a pair of gods in the underworld, and there is pair of creator gods in the paradise of Tamoanchan who must cooperate in order for human life to be restarted. Also, we are introduced to three of the major themes of the pantheon. There are creator gods, fertility gods, and gods who sacrifice. Let us discuss all three and show some of the characteristics of each god who contributed to the daily life of the Aztecs.

### CREATOR GODS

Besides Ometeotl, the Lord of Duality, who was the Supreme Creator God, there were a series of creator gods who did the work of organizing the universe. Each was revered by the general populace, from ruler to commoner. The four main creator gods, Quetzalcoatl, Tezcatlipoca, Xiuhtecuhtli, and Tlaloc, received widespread representations carved in wood and stone or painted in murals and manuscripts. These were the gods who struggled for ascendancy during the four suns that preceded the Fifth Sun. There are widespread images of these deities as well as myths about their powers, adventures, and influences.

One of the most powerful creator gods was Tezcatlipoca, the Lord of the Smoking Mirror. He was lavishly decorated with feathers and mirrors. On the social level of the local community, he was the great sorcerer whose smoking obsidian mirror revealed the powers of darkness, night, jaguars, and shamanic magic. He was active, involved, intimidating, and overbearing. Consider this list of alternative names for this god: he was also called Yohualli Ehecatl, "Night Wind," or invisible wind; Moyocoyatzin, "Capricious One"; Monenequi, "Tyrannical One"; Yaotl, "The Enemy"; Necoc Yaotl, "The Enemy on Both Sides." In other words, he was awesome. In fact, he was capable of being everywhere. One prayer to Tezcatlipoca went like this: "O master, O our lord . . . O night, O wind; thou seest, thou knowest the things within the trees, the rocks. And behold now, it is true that thou knowest of things within us; thou hearest



Tezcatlipoca, "the Smoking Mirror." (Codex Borgia, from Warwick Bray, *Everyday Life of the Ancient Aztecs*. London: B. T. Batsford, 1968. Courtesy of B. T. Batsford, Ltd.)

us from within, what we say, what we think; our minds, our hearts. It is as if smoke, mist arose before thee."<sup>18</sup>

Another creative power was Xiuhtecuhtli, the ancient fire god who influenced every level of society and the cosmos. Xiuhtecuhtli was the "fire of existence" that was kept lighted in certain temples at all times. He was also the fire in each family's home, providing warmth, light, and power for cooking. Xiuhtecuhtli was especially present in the various "new" fire ceremonies that accompanied the inauguration of new temples, ballcourts, and palaces, and he was especially important during the great New Fire Ceremony that took place once every fifty-two years at the end of the Aztec calendar round. When we discuss the general meaning and purpose of human sacrifice, we shall see both the popularity and power of this creator god.

## GODS OF FERTILITY

Daily life in the Aztec world revolved in large part around farming and the powers of fertility and agricultural regeneration. Every family depended on various forms of intensive agriculture that required organized labor schedules of planting, nurturing, and harvesting. The gods of



Chalchiuhtlicue, goddess of running waters. (Codex Borbonicus, courtesy of Siglo Veintiuno Editores, Mexico.)

agriculture were all around and part of everyday existence. People carried out rituals for burning fields, preparing the ground for seed, planting, observing the stages of growth, sowing the maize, storing the food, and eating it. Like young children, the fields needed constant attention, care, and nurturance. While many female deities inspired worship and the regeneration of plants, the most ancient and honored fertility-rain god was Tlaloc, who lived on mountain peaks where clouds were thought to emerge from caves to fertilize the land with rain. One mountain in particular, Mt. Tlaloc, was worshipped as the original source of the waters and vegetation. As you would expect, Tlaloc was accompanied by a female counterpart, sometimes known as Chalchiuhtlicue, the goddess of the lake and running water; she was represented in various forms, including precious greenstone effigies.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Tlaloc was his paradise, Tlalocan. It was one of the desired places of afterlife, a kind of earth paradise setting. The Aztecs who spoke to Father Bernardino de Sahagún about their world view told him that in Tlalocan "there is much well-being . . . there is much wealth. There is no suffering. There is no lack of maize, squash, squash flower *huauzontle*, tomatoes, string beans, marigolds. And the *tlaloque* live there, who are like priests, like the fire offering priests."<sup>19</sup> People struck by lightning and those who drowned were assured of a place in Tlalocan. Dying in these ways meant that Tlaloc had chosen them as a reward or as a way of demonstrating his power. Most of all, Tlalocan was conceived of as a great storehouse of water and fertilizing energy. The *tlaloque*, or Tlalocs, gave and took the treasured forces of new life.

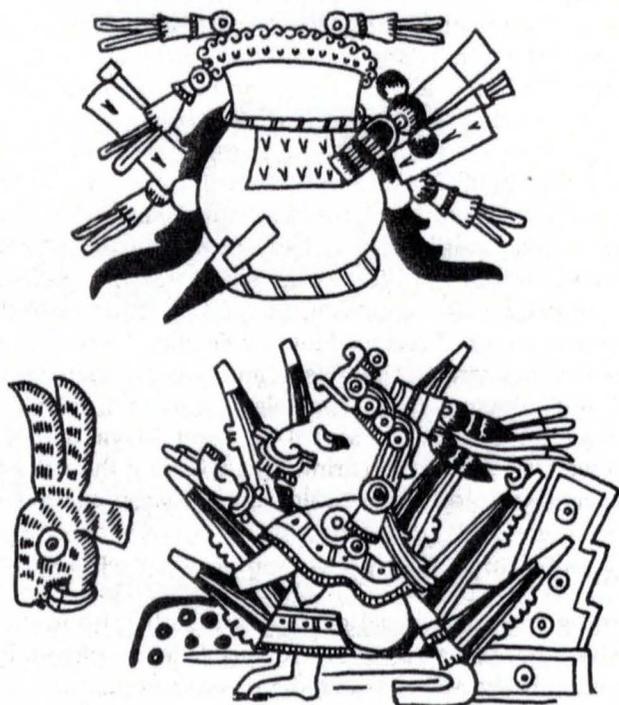
There was an ensemble of mother goddesses, and some were thought

of as earth-mother figures who represented the abundant powers of the earth, women, and fertility. These were the deities of earth, water, the moon, drunkenness, sex, the birth of life, fertilization, illness, and healing of cold diseases. The underlying concept was of the Mother who could provide comfort or harm, love or terror, and life or death. One of the most important mother goddesses was Tonantzin, "Our Venerable Mother," who was revered far and wide in Aztec times. When the Spaniards came, the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared on the same hill that was dedicated to the worship of Tonantzin. Perhaps the most powerful earth-mother goddess was Coatlicue, "the Lady of the Serpent Skirt," whose astonishing sculptural image will be examined in Chapter 6. Other earth goddesses who present the opposing, life-giving elements of the earth include Xochiquetzal, or "Precious Flowery Feather," who was the goddess of romance, love, and sexual desire and was associated with flowers, feasting, and pleasure. There was also Tlazolteotl, the Goddess of Filth, who was the goddess of sexual sin, and Mayahuel, "Circle of Arms," who was the goddess of drinking. Following the pattern of duality seen earlier, these goddesses could also appear in masculine forms.

### THE HUMAN BODY AS A COSMOS

Before turning to the sacrificial gods, it will be helpful to discuss the most pervasive type of sacred space in the Aztec world—the human body. The human body was considered a potent receptacle of cosmological forces, a living, moving center of the world. As in the elaborate image of the cosmos from the *Codex Fejérváry-Mayer*, at the heart of the universe stands the body of Xiuhtecuhtli, the Fire God. From his body flow four streams of blood into the four quarters of the universe, giving them energy and life. In Aztec cosmology, the human body was the recipient of divine forces that were internalized and lodged within different body parts, giving them sacred potency. Another way of saying this is that the human body was believed to contain three souls, or animistic entities, which could be strengthened or weakened during a person's lifetime. These souls were called the *tonalli*, the *teyolia*, and the *ihiyotl*.

The *tonalli* (from *tona*, "to irradiate" or "make warm with sun") was collected and nurtured in the human skull. The original source of *tonalli* was Ometeotl, the supreme Dual God residing at the top of the thirteen celestial layers. But the divine *tonalli* reached the human through the action of celestial beings inhabiting other levels of the sky. It was believed that at the moment of the conception of a human being, Ometeotl intervened on one of the celestial levels and sent vital energy into the uterus of the female. This energy was deposited into the head of the embryo, resulting in the original shape of one's temperament and des-



Mayahuel, goddess of *maguey* and the ritual drinking of *pulque*. (Codex Borgia, courtesy of Siglo Veintiuno Editores, Mexico.)

tiny. After being born containing this initial amount of *tonalli*, the child was ritually placed near a fire and eventually exposed to the sun in order to increase his or her *tonalli*. Although the sun was believed to be the most powerful visible source of *tonalli*, people could acquire *tonalli* from members of their family or other people with whom they had intimate contact.

The term *tonalli* has a rich range of meanings referring to vigor, warmth, solar heat, summertime, and soul. *Tonalli* infiltrated animals, gods, plants, humans, and objects used in rituals. The hair that covered the head, especially the fontanel area, was a major receptacle of *tonalli*. The hair prevented the *tonalli* from leaving the body and was therefore a major prize in warfare. It was believed that the fortitude and valor of a warrior resided, in part, in the hair, and there are many pictorial scenes showing Aztec warriors grabbing the hair of enemies. The hair of war-

riors captured in battle was kept by the captors in order to increase their own *tonalli*. The decapitated head of an enemy warrior was a supreme prize for the city, which gained more *tonalli* through ceremonies.

The *teyolia*, which resided in the human heart, was another divine force animating the human body. *Teyolia* was thought of as "divine fire," and it animated the human being and gave shape to a person's sensibilities and thinking patterns. It was the rational force in human life. Every human heart contained this divine fire, but an extraordinary amount resided in the hearts of priests, artists, and the men and women who impersonated deities during festivals. Each of these human types was considered a living channel of *teyolia* into the social world, a kind of gift of good energy for the community. When one did something extraordinary in art, government, war, or other social expressions, one's *teyolia* increased.

When a person died, his or her *teyolia* traveled to the celestial world of the dead, known as the "sky of the sun," where it was transformed into birds. This pattern of spiritual transformation was a crucial idea in Aztec thought, because the extraction of enemy hearts (after the enemy warrior had been transformed into a god) resulted in a larger supply of divine energy for the sun god. One text states: "Therefore, the ancients said that when they died, men did not perish, but began to live again almost as if awakened from a dream and that they became spirits or gods. They said to them, 'Lord, lady, awaken, now it is beginning to dawn, now it is day break; the yellow, plumed birds are beginning to sing, and now the multicolored butterflies are flying.'"<sup>20</sup>

*Teyolia* resided in mountains, lakes, towns, temples, plants, people, and powerful objects. All important landscapes, such as the lakes of Mexico and the mountains, had *teyolia*, or "heart." Each community had an *altepeyollotl*, or heart of the town, a living divine force sometimes represented in a sculpture or decorated image. During the recent excavation of the Great Aztec Temple a number of statues were discovered representing the *teyolia* or heart of the sacred pyramid.

The third human soul or animistic entity was the *ihiyotl*, which resided in the liver. The *ihiyotl* was believed to be a luminous gas that could attract and cast spells over other human beings. It could be used to charm and bring health to another person or used magically to cause damage to human life, plants, animals, and events. The *ihiyotl* was expelled through a person's breath or the breath caused by the wave of a hand.

These three souls gave the human body extraordinary value, vulnerability, and power and show how human beings were little images of the cosmos, filled with divine power.

## SACRIFICIAL GODS AND WORLD VIEW

One of the most challenging parts of Aztec life was the sacrifice of humans, animals, plants, and various substances, which will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter. As with all acts of life, sacred forces were present, and there were a number of gods associated with sacrificial ceremonies. In fact, it may be that all the gods were part of the sacrificial cult. One way for gods to become a central part of the sacrifice was through the intermediary of the *teotl ixiptla*, the deity impersonator. The deity impersonator, or better, the "image" of the god, could be an animal, plant, object, or, most significantly, a human being. The human being was transformed magically through complicated ritual techniques into a *living image of the god*. This *teotl ixiptla*, or god image, was then sacrificed, resulting in the rebirth of the god as a potent new being. The ceremony known as Toxcatl illustrates this conception. It consisted of transforming a warrior with ideal attributes into the god Tezcatlipoca. The warrior was carefully chosen, dressed, taught, worshipped, and finally sacrificed in a public setting. The individual needed to possess a perfect physique. This perfect individual would be adorned as the god; he was taught to play flutes, to speak eloquently, and to parade around the city. At the end of one year, he was given four women *ixiptla* for companionship, and then he was sacrificed and decapitated. His head was displayed in the central marketplace, and Tezcatlipoca was regenerated.

The practice of sacrifice should come as no surprise given our earlier study of the myths of the creation of the Fifth Sun, when the gods sacrificed themselves in the fires of Teotihuacan to bring forth the sun. The sun, Tonatiuh (whose visage appears in the center of the so-called Aztec Calendar Stone), depended on continued nourishment from human hearts. His tongue is a sacrificial knife extended as if parched with thirst.

To develop a general understanding of the way sacrifice reflected and influenced the overall world view of the Aztecs, it helps to focus on one sacrifice in particular. The New Fire Ceremony, held once every fifty-two years in order to re-create the world in which the Aztecs dwelled, helps us see the strange relationship between *creativity* and *sacrifice*. Notice how different sacred places and the calendar are interwoven in this ritual.

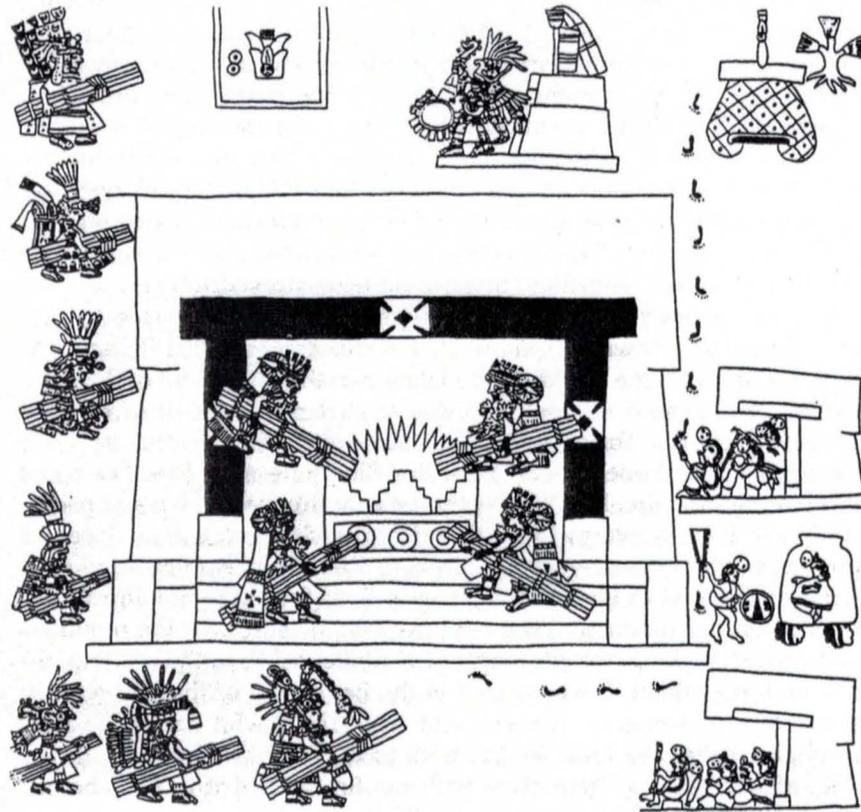
On the morning of the New Fire Ceremony, a procession of fire priests with a captive warrior, "arranged in order and wearing the garb of the gods," passed out of the capital city toward a sacred shrine on the Hill of the Star. During the weeks prior to the decisive night on which the ceremony took place, the populace all over the Aztec world extinguished their fires, cast statues of gods into the water, and swept clean their homes, patios, and walkways. Pregnant women put on masks of *maguey*

leaves, children were punched and nudged away to avoid being turned magically into mice, and some women were closed up in granaries to prevent them from being turned into beasts who would devour men. For on this night in the calendar round of 18,980 nights, the Aztec fire priests regenerated the entire cosmos through the heart sacrifice of a captive warrior specifically chosen by the king. We are told that when the procession arrived "in the deep night" at the Hill of the Star, the populace climbed onto their roofs. Craning their necks and focusing their complete attention on the hill, they became filled with dread that the sun would not be regenerated and the world would be destroyed forever.

As the ceremony proceeded, the fire priests focused on the movements of a star group known as *Tianquiztli*, the cluster we call the Pleiades. As it passed through the meridian, signaling that the movement of the heavens had not ceased, a small fire was started on the chest of the outstretched warrior. The text reads, "When a little fire fell, then speedily the priest slashed open the breast with a flint knife, seized the heart, and thrust it into the fire. In the open chest a new fire was drawn and people could see it from everywhere." To also participate in the sacrifice, the populace cut their ears—even the ears of children in cradles—and spattered their blood in the ritual flicking of their fingers in the direction of the fire on the mountain. The new fire was taken down the mountain and carried to the pyramid temple of *Huitzilopochtli* in the center of the city of *Tenochtitlan*. It was placed in the fire holder of the statue of the god. Then messengers, runners, and fire priests who had come from throughout the area took the fire back to the cities, where the common folk, after blistering themselves with the fire, placed it in their homes, and "all were quieted in their hearts."

This dramatic performance is an outstanding example of what is meant by "world view." In this sacrificial ceremony, the world is "viewed," as the populace sees vividly the procession of *teteo ixiptla*, the city, the darkness, the new fire, and the stars. But the world is also renewed! And that is the key to this aspect of the world view—the world is in dire need of constant renewal. Also called *Toxiuhmolpilia*, or "the Binding of the Years," the ceremony provides a picture of the Aztec commitment to the regeneration of the cosmos that relates astronomy, calendars, child-rearing, autosacrifice, war, and human sacrifice together. It also links the capital city with a sacred mountain, and both of these sacred sites to the towns, homes, and populace of the entire empire.

It is important to emphasize how much is observed by the general populace. The procession of priests and people wearing the costumes of gods moves along a public passageway through the city and out into the countryside during the day. Thousands of people witness this sacred parade. After the priests and deity impersonators walk the twenty kilometers and climb the ceremonial hill, the populace observes another



New Fire Ceremony. (*Codex Borbonicus*, courtesy of Siglo Veintiuno Editores, Mexico.)

procession—the celestial procession of the stars through the meridian. Then, there is the public dousing of all fires and the engulfment in darkness. After the horrendous sacrifice, the new fire is lit amid universal rejoicing and bleeding. Everyone experiences a little pain for this renewal to take place. Imagine the impact of living along the lakes and seeing in the darkness from the shores and islands the single great fire roaring on the Hill of the Star and then streaming down the mountain across the lake and into the city. There it lights up the major temple precinct. Then, in a slow version of one of our own fireworks explosions, the fire spreads out in all directions as it is taken to the towns and cities, where it lights up the temples, the palaces, and the homes of the entire populace. That is the renewal of the world through a sacrificial ceremony! This is the Aztec purpose of sacrifice—the renewal of all life.

## THE SHAPE AND RHYTHM OF AZTEC TIME

What about the Aztec understanding of time on the cosmic and daily levels? We have already seen how the universe passed through four great eras, each ending in a cataclysm but also giving way to a new cosmos. And we have seen how the Aztecs were careful to mark their important memories with specific dates in the form of day-signs. It is very important to know how all these spaces—the four quarters, the center of the world, the dualities, the thirteen heavens, and the nine underworlds—revolved, changed, or experienced the passage of time.

The dynamics of the Aztec universe can first be understood in terms of the three kinds of time—the transcendent time of the gods, the active time of the gods, and the time of humans—which all flowed together. We will look at these three kinds of time and then outline the yearly and daily calendar that influenced every part of Aztec life.

Before there was human time or even the time of the creation myths we studied earlier, there was a *transcendent* time of the Dual God who dwelled quietly in the highest heavens. This supreme being existed in peace but provided the original energy and structure of the universe. This primordial time of the gods, when order first appeared out of chaos but did not exist as action, continues to exist in a celestial realm. This existence is reflected in the notion of Omeyocan, the Dual Heaven, where all was in balance and silence.

This peaceful time was broken by a second flow of time, the time when the gods acted out all kinds of events, including creations, abductions, violations, wars, deaths, games, and even the sacrifice and dismembering of other gods in order to make an existence in which humans could eventually dwell. We saw a vivid example of this in the creation of the Fifth Sun in Teotihuacan.

These creative/destructive actions gave way to a third kind of time, the time of humans, which flowed and developed in the middle of the universe—the earth's surface—and the four lower heavens. It was during the second cosmic time, when the supernatural forces acted in all levels of the universe, that the calendar came into being, an invention of the gods to be used to govern and interact with the time of human beings. We know that the calendar was made during the second period, because the creation myths often tell of specific dates of creation. All humans and other significant beings created in the third era have sacred and magical names corresponding to the time of their birth.

What is fascinating and makes the story more complex is that neither the time of the transcendent gods nor the time of mythical action *ceased* after the birth of the time of human beings. In fact, supernatural beings were created who became intimately connected to daily life in human spaces on earth. Also, the forces from the time of the mythic events kept

ruling the time of human life on earth through the cycles of nature and the calendar round. We can conceive of these three times as a wheel within a larger wheel within an even larger wheel, even though they don't always turn in the same direction or on the same plane. But each hour and day in earthly time is in touch with the particular forces of the time of the gods and the time of myth. *In this way each human day coincided with a special moment in mythical time and received the imprint of the world of the gods. Each moment of human time was a kind of crossroads where a plurality of divine forces met to determine the kind of day that people lived through.*

The Aztec had a sacred almanac, a 260-day cycle called the *tonalpohualli*, or "count of days." Twenty day-signs ran consecutively from Alligator through Flower, repeating after the twentieth day. These twenty signs interacted with the numbers 1 through 13, which also repeated. This meant that the twenty day-signs and the thirteen numbers, advancing side by side, yielded a 260-day cycle before starting over again. To get an idea of just two forces meeting at the crossroads, observe how each of the twenty day-signs are distributed among the four directions of the universe.

East	North	West	South
<i>Cipactli</i> (Alligator)	<i>Ocelotl</i> (Jaguar)	<i>Mazatl</i> (Deer)	<i>Xochitl</i> (Flower)
<i>Acatl</i> (Reed)	<i>Miquiztli</i> (Death)	<i>Quiahuitl</i> (Rain)	<i>Malinalli</i> (Grass)
<i>Coatl</i> (Serpent)	<i>Tecpatl</i> (Flint Knife)	<i>Ozomatli</i> (Monkey)	<i>Cuetzpallin</i> (Lizard)
<i>Ollin</i> (Movement)	<i>Itzcuintli</i> (Dog)	<i>Calli</i> (House)	<i>Cozcacuauhtli</i> (Vulture)
<i>Atl</i> (Water)	<i>Ehecatl</i> (Wind)	<i>Cuauhtli</i> (Eagle)	<i>Tochtli</i> (Rabbit)

One of the four directions with its colors, sacred tree, and sacred bird influenced *every* day in the life of a person. This also meant that the Aztecs had to know their math!

Along with the 260-day cycle, there was also a 365-day cycle, or solar calendar, called the *xiuhpohualli*. This solar calendar was divided into eighteen sections or "months" each containing twenty days, with five unlucky or "empty" days, called the *nemontemi*, situated after the eighteenth month at the end of the year. Each month had a major celebration. What is remarkable is that the 260-day *tonalpohualli* and the 365-day *xiuhpohualli* operated simultaneously, using the same day-signs and counting system, and the interaction between these two calendars produced a larger cycle of fifty-two solar years. As we saw in our discussion of the New Fire Ceremony, the ending and beginning of this cycle were vital moments of cosmic renewal in the Aztec world.

The calendars marked and regulated the passage of natural and su-

## Day-Signs

## Numerical Coefficients

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
 <i>Cipactli</i> Alligator	1	41	81	121	161	201	241	21	61	101	141	181	221
 <i>Ehecatl</i> Wind	222	2	42	82	122	162	202	242	22	62	102	142	182
 <i>Calli</i> house	183	223	3	43	83	123	163	203	243	23	63	103	143
 <i>Cuetzpallin</i> Lizard	144	184	224	4	44	84	124	164	204	244	24	64	104
 <i>Coatl</i> Serpent	105	145	185	225	5	45	85	125	165	205	245	25	65
 <i>Miquiztli</i> Death	66	106	146	186	226	6	46	86	126	166	206	246	26
 <i>Mazatl</i> Deer	27	67	107	147	187	227	7	47	87	127	167	207	247
 <i>Tochtli</i> Rabbit	248	28	68	108	148	188	228	8	48	88	128	168	208
 <i>Atl</i> Water	209	249	29	69	109	149	189	229	9	49	89	129	169
 <i>Itzcuintli</i> Dog	170	210	250	30	70	110	150	190	230	10	50	90	130
 <i>Ozomatl</i> Monkey	131	171	211	251	31	71	111	151	191	231	11	51	91
 <i>Malinalli</i> Grass	92	132	172	212	252	32	72	112	152	192	232	12	52
 <i>Acatl</i> Reed	53	93	133	173	213	253	33	73	113	153	193	233	13
 <i>Ocelotl</i> Jaguar	14	54	94	134	174	214	254	34	74	114	154	194	234
 <i>Cuauhtli</i> Eagle	235	15	55	95	135	175	215	255	35	75	115	155	195
 <i>Cozcacuauhtli</i> Vulture	196	236	16	56	96	136	176	216	256	36	76	116	156
 <i>Ollin</i> Movement	157	197	237	17	57	97	137	177	217	257	37	77	117
 <i>Tecpatl</i> Flint Knife	118	158	198	238	18	58	98	138	178	218	258	38	78
 <i>Quiahuitl</i> Rain	79	119	159	199	239	19	59	99	139	179	219	259	39
 <i>Xochitl</i> Flower	40	80	120	160	200	240	20	60	100	140	180	220	260

All local and regional variations of the Mesoamerican calendar in use when the Spaniards arrived were based on a 260-day ritual cycle, referred to in Nahuatl as the *tonalpohualli*. The *tonalpohualli* was organized in twenty thirteen-day periods, which the Spanish priests called *trecenas*. Each of the 260 days was uniquely named by combining one of twenty possible day-signs with one of thirteen possible numbers or numerical coefficients. The ritual calendar began with day 1 Alligator and ended with the day 13 Flower. The progression of days went 1 Alligator, 2 Wind, 3 House, 4 Lizard, 5 Serpent, 6 Death, 7 Deer, 8 Rabbit, 9 Water, 10 Dog, 11 Monkey, 12 Grass, 13 Reed. Upon reaching the coefficient 13, the first *trecena* was completed and the second *trecena* began using the coefficient 1 with the next day-sign, Jaguar. Thus, the count continued with 1 Jaguar, 2 Eagle, 3 Vulture, 4 Movement, 5 Flint, 6 Rain, 7 Flower. After the twentieth day-sign (Flower), the count went back to the first day-sign, Alligator. Thus, the count continued with 8 Alligator, 9 Wind, 10 House, 11 Lizard, 12 Serpent, 13 Death, 1 Deer, 2 Rabbit, 3 Water, and so on, until all of the 260 combinations became exhausted on the day 13 Flower. (Courtesy of Scott Sessions.)

pernatural influences into human life. The numbers and signs of the Aztec calendar, however, were much more than artistic combinations. They had to do with fate—human fate and the fate of all life—and they were used for naming individuals. For instance, as soon as a child was born, the parents invited a “day-count reader” to the home who was told the exact instant of the child’s birth. These calendar priests would open up one of their divinatory books and study the paintings associated with the day-signs and numbers surrounding the child’s birth. A careful study ensued in which the priest identified the particular day-sign of the child’s birth, but also the other signs related to that major sign. Since each day-sign had numerous powers and qualities, the family and the calendar priest looked for the most positive combinations. The numbers 3, 7, and 10 through 13 were fortunate, while 6, 8, and 9 brought bad luck. A combined reading could bring a positive interpretation into the naming of a child even if the basic number was negative. For instance, if a child was born on what was considered a negative day-sign, the other associated signs could bring positive influences into the child’s life. If the birthdate were particularly gloomy, the day-count reader would urge the parents to wait for a favorable day-sign and number, which would then become the child’s name.

The person’s life was forever shaped by the forces and influences of his or her calendar name. One of the most famous Aztecs, Nezahualcoyotl, the ruler of Tezcoco, had the calendar name 1 Deer, a day whose destiny included nobility, fame, and success in war. In fact, he was one of the great poet/warriors of Aztec history in spite of many obstacles. The day 4 Dog brought prosperity to a person, especially if he bred dogs for food. It was believed that his dogs would be healthy, breed well, and live long lives. “It was said: ‘How can it be otherwise? The dogs share a day-sign with him.’” An unfavorable day-sign was 2 Rabbit, the day dedicated to the *pulque* gods; it meant that the child had the capacity to become a drunkard. Traders left and returned home on specific days. Wars were started only when the days had strong, positive signs. All events were regulated by this system. An Aztec scholar, Elizabeth Boone, sums up the calendar influences this way:

Even an individual born under the most auspicious day-sign, however, could meet disaster if he or she forgot to heed the day-sign. The days carried meaning for every activity, and, in the Aztec world, it was crucial that events happen at the right time. Merchants knew that they should only begin their journeys on a few favorable days: 1 Alligator, 1 Monkey, 7 Serpent, or the best, 1 Serpent, called the “straight way.” Approaching home, they would delay on the route to wait for a good day-sign for the homecoming. Father Durán was amazed that the Aztecs followed the signs of the

days rather than the sign of the fields when it came to harvest. He recalled how the people would not harvest their corn, even though it was ready and in danger of rotting, until the correct day had arrived: "They could have gathered the crop earlier, at their leisure, but since the old sorcerer found in his book or almanac that the day had come, he proclaimed it to the people and they went off in great speed." Father Durán clearly did not understand that timing—doing things according to the auguries of the days—was fundamental to maintaining a balanced world.<sup>21</sup>

It was exactly this search for a balanced world that the ancestral warrior/chief Xolotl was hoping to achieve on that distant morning when he climbed the mountain on the edge of the lakes of Mexico, collected those grasses into a circle, and shot his four arrows into the four directions of the universe. These simple and complex symbols and rituals functioned to give order, balance, and power to the Aztec world. It is now time to enter into the center of that world, the great city of Tenochtitlan, which waits for us, shimmering in the lake like a five-quartered jewel in the middle of the Basin.