Feasts for the Gods: Food and Consumption in Aztec Veintena Rituals

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The examination of food and its consumption in a society can lead to a wealth of information about a culture's worldview. What is eaten often reflects a society's system of beliefs and ideals. The sixteenth-century Aztecs of Central Mexico depicted eating and foodstuffs in an array of artistic mediums. They painted images of people preparing foods, transporting and storing foods and of the foods themselves. Aztec artists rendered fish, birds, and animals, as well as plants and vegetables, in stone, wood, clay and paint. They also created stone and clay images of deities that were connected to foods, such as sculptures of maize gods. There are also countless images of teeth and mouths devouring, as seen in canonical works like the Sun Stone and the monumental sculptures of the earth goddess Coatlicue. Painted manuscripts by indigenous artists and European chroniclers alike document ceremonial practices that included the use of foods. The consumption of food was an integral part not only of the Aztecs' daily subsistence, but of the ways in which they viewed their larger world.

This paper analyzes the role of food and consumption in specific Aztec ceremonies; special attention will be paid to rites connected to maize and other fertility deities. Called *veintena* by Spanish writers, this series of eighteen public ceremonies was performed annually in accordance with the 365-day solar calendar. Of greatest importance in these celebrations are ceremonies in which everyday grains such as maize and amaranth become sacralized; significantly, it is in connection to rituals of sacrifice that these foods are transformed into cosmic sustenance. The question of transformation in ritual is key. Not only were

foods transformed in ritual performances through either a physical or symbolic metamorphosis, but the rituals themselves were transformative because of the *use* of food.

The Veintena Ceremonies

The veintena ceremonies are recorded in great detail in Book 2 (The Ceremonies) of the post-conquest, sixteenth-century manuscript *General History of the Things of New Spain*, also known as the *Florentine Codex*, which was organized by the Spanish friar Bernardino de Sahagún and his native artists and informants. The *Florentine Codex* is an encyclopedic work on Aztec culture and religion; the finished product is a bilingual work (in Spanish and Nahuatl) accompanied by painted images. In addition to the images by the artists of Sahagún's work, the veintena gods and ceremonies are visually recorded in painted manuscripts such as one part of the *Codex Borbonicus*, the first part of the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis,* and a section of the *Codex Magliabechiano.* When comparing the various sixteenth-century sources, both written and pictorial, it is apparent that the names and order of the veintenas, as well as the activities associated with them, were not uniform throughout Central Mexico (Quiñones Keber 1995:135). Regional and local veintena ceremonies also varied from those in the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán and other major centers.

Eighteen veintenas were celebrated throughout the year, each corresponding to a particular deity or deities. Individual components varied in length of time, sometimes taking place for various days. Veintena festivals were performed throughout the Aztec empire. Although the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlán was the most significant site where celebrations were carried out, rituals also took place in small towns, local temples, and private homes. Even allowing for local differences, the veintena celebrations solidified broad social and religious concepts. The ceremonies revolved around the agricultural calendar with rituals performed in association with the natural cycle of plant growth and harvest. They were very public occasions for the Aztec man and woman to visually conceptualize their worldview. The connection between the individual, his surroundings, and the continuation of time and life would have been an aim of such public displays. The way food

was incorporated (and sometimes absent) in veintena ceremonies is significant. Table 1 lists each of the eighteen veintenas, their corresponding deities, and the foods mentioned in each by Sahagún's informants in Book 2 of the *Florentine Codex.*

Transformation in Aztec Consumption Rituals

In Aztec mythology food takes on a supernatural role by being the catalyst for cosmic change. For example, one myth recounts how each cosmic age began and ended in connection with the eating of specific foods or the conversion of humans into foodstuffs (Bierhorst 1992:142-144). In the *Codex Chimalpopoca* five suns or eras are continuously created and destroyed and each of these periods is marked by a transformation that occurs through food. In some myths deities are transformed into food; for example, Sahagún records a story of deity warfare in which one god, who is being pursued by another, escapes by transforming himself into maize, then maguey, and finally a salamander (Anderson and Dibble 1950-1980, bk. 7). In yet another story, the creation of the world and all its food source comes about through the transformation of the remains of a dead creature who becomes a symbol of the earth itself (Garibay 1979:108).

While these cosmic transformations relegate food to a supernatural realm, changes in food are also part of a natural process. Food substances are always changing from raw materials to prepared meals; they constantly move through different stages. The cycle of a maize seed growing into a plant that, in turn, is harvested and prepared in various ways is a powerful example of a food's transformation from one state to another. Rituals performed in agricultural ceremonies often paralleled the natural metamorphosis of food. For example, in the agricultural ceremony called Hueytecuihuitl ("Great Feast Day of the Lords") that honored the young maize goddess Xilonen, tortillas of green maize and cooked amaranth greens were eaten (Anderson and Dibble 1950-1980, bk. 2). This communal meal was fitting for a celebration of the young fertility goddess whose domain included the young and tender stages of maize and other plants.

Table 1.
Aztec Veintena Rituals and Corresponding Foods

Veintena	Major Deities	Food
Atlcahualo ("Ceasing of Water")	Tlaloc, Chalchiuhlicue ("Jade Her Skirt"), Quetzalcoatl ("Quetzal Feather Serpent")	amaranth seeds, tortillas
Etzalcualiztli ("Eating of Etzalli")	Rain Gods	*Etzalli* (cooked maize and beans), maize balls, green chilies
Hueytecuihuitl ("Great Feast Day of the Lords")	Xilonen ("Young Maize Ear Doll")	pinole sweetened with honey, atole, tamales made with maize, tamales made with fruit, tamales made with blossoms, tamales with twisted ends, cane of green corn, cooked amaranth greens, pulque; additionally the poor were fed for seven or eight days
Hueytozoztli ("Great Vigil")	Centeotl ("Maize Cob Lord")	white atole, atole made of maize softened with lime, *aquetzalli* (atole made with fruit), hard baked frog, pinole with beans, toasted maize, maize of various colors, beans, amaranth, chia, quail
Ochpaniztli ("Road Sweeping")	Teteo Inna ("Gods Their Mother")	maize and squash seeds
Panquetzaliztli ("Raising of the Banners")	Huitzilopochtli ("Humming Bird Left")	tamales of amaranth seeds, pulque, chocolate, meat and other food (not specified)
Quecholli ("Precious Feather")	Mixcoatl ("Cloud Serpent")	great hunt: deer, coyotes, rabbits; other food and drink (but not specified)

Veintena	Major Deities	Food
Tecuilhuitontli ("Small Feast Day of the Lords")	Huixtociuatl ("Lady of Salt")	Pulque
Teotleco ("Arrival of the Gods")	Huitzilopochtli ("Humming Bird Left"), Xiuhtecuhtli ("Turquoise Lord")	dried grains of maize, ears of maize, toasted maize, maize dough, balls, pulque
Tepeihuitl ("Hill Feast Day")	Rain Gods	pulque
Tititl	Illamatecuhtli ("Old Mother"), Tonan ("Our Mother"), Cozcamiauh ("Necklace of Corn Flowers")	maize balls
Tlacaxipehualiztli ("Flaying of Men")	Xipe Totec ("Flayed Our Lord")	tlacataolli (dried maize stew), pulque, tortilla of uncooked maize, tamales of wild amaranth seeds, turkey hens
Tlaxochimaco ("Giving of Flowers")	Huitzilopochtli ("Humming Bird Left")	tamales, turkey hens, dogs, pulque
Toxcatl ("Dry Thing")	Tezcatlipoca ("Smoking Mirror"), Titlacauan ("We His Slaves")	tamales made with fruit, tamales softened with lime, bean and cornmeal cakes, tamales of coarse white flour, tamales rolled up in amaranth seed dough, quail, other (not specified)
Tozoztontli ("Small Vigil")	Tlaloc, Coatlicue ("Serpent Her Skirt")	food served but not specified
Xocotlhuetzi ("Xocotl Falls")	Xiuhtecuhtli ("Turquoise Lord")	food served (but not specified)

Feasting in Aztec Culture

Cultural anthropologists define a feast in various ways. Some scholars take a very direct approach, defining a feast as "an analytical rubric used to describe forms of ritual activity that involve the communal consumption of food and drink" (Dietler 2001:65). Other scholars simply define it as a sharing between two or more people of special foods; these special foods, however, are not generally served at daily meals (Hayden 2001:28). This second definition cannot be applied to the Aztecs who used one of their basic staples, maize, in both daily and sacred meals. My own definition of *feasting* is more in tune with ethnographer Polly Weissner who defines it as involving 1) the aggregation of people; 2) food sharing and food distribution; 3) a specific occasion (for example, to appease ancestors, initiate youth, marry, or bury the dead); 4) some form of display; and 5) abundance (Weissner 2001:116-117).

Feasting for the Aztecs was a multifaceted event and involved an array of elements other than food. An Aztec feast could include music, singing, story-telling, dancing, incense and the burning of copal, flowers, tobacco smoking, offerings and gift-giving, among other activities (Anderson and Dibble 1950-1980, bks. 4-5, 122). A critical requirement was that these items should be provided in abundance. Sixteenth-century Spanish chroniclers emphasize this throughout their descriptions of Aztec feasts. Sahagún's informants record that a good feast was one in which guests were given plenty, both in food and in offerings. Diego Durán, another Spanish friar, wrote "everything was to be created in abundance" (Heyden 1994:319).

Aztec feasts were also about a display of material wealth and culture as well as of social and political relations. A feast allowed a host to make his wealth and power visually evident. In addition to the abundance of food served and offerings made, some feasts required that the host provide gifts and lodging to his guests; Durán, for example, lists goods that were given to guests which included luxury items such as a mantle and jewelry (Heyden 1994:319). Royal feasts often included the invitation of both friends and enemies from afar. These special guests needed to be provided with lodging for several days, if not weeks. The

wealth of goods displayed at a feast could often belong to a group or several individuals, allowing for group or class distinction and association (Clendinnen 1991:38). While some Aztec feasts were overtly political in nature, such as those having to do with state-level religious and ruler ceremonies, others, such as domestic feasts and merchant banquets, were less so. The inherent nature of a feast does indeed allow for the construction of politics. A feast brings people together, promoting the creation and maintenance of relationships—political, social or both.

Another important aspect of Aztec feasts and of feasting in general is the sequencing of events. Sequence in a feast can be so structured that it can itself become a ritual (Dietler 2001:70). Sahagún's informants note that eating at a feast corresponded to rank (Anderson and Dibble, 1950-1980, bks. 4-5, 121). They go on to say:

> And thereupon went the server, following him those who changed the courses and carried [the food] in their arms. They served the people, placed them in order, went placing the people in line, putting them all in line.

This passage emphasizes social order and structure in Aztec feasting. Sequence was also important in the selection of the day for the feast; all feasts were held on specific days chosen in consultation with a calendar specialist, or diviner.

Food in the Veintenas

During the veintenas, food was included in two major ways, as offered goods or as eaten foodstuffs. Food offerings were particularly significant in ceremonies celebrating fertility deities. These gods would have been honored due to their role in providing sustenance to the Aztecs, hence food offerings were a significant element in keeping a cosmic balance. During Hueytozoztli ("Great Vigil"), which honored the maize and rain gods, food was gathered and placed in temples; Sahagún's informants note that the foods offered were everyday staples such as beans, chia, and maize (Anderson and Dibble 1950-1980, bk. 2, 7). Durán emphasizes the importance of food to Aztec veintena ceremonies, telling his reader before he details the specific ceremonies:

> Petitions were made to the deities, begging for a good, fruitful year full of fortunate events. New foods were eaten, different from everyday fare. This custom of eating different foods on feast days was a ceremonial rite. The people made distinctions among the dishes, and for every feast a new food was prepared—that which was permissible on said festivity (Heyden 1994:414).

One example is the feast observed during the month Izcalli ("Growth") in honor of the fire god Xiuhtecuhtli and the rain god Tlaloc. These celebrations included the making of special tamales, called *huauhquitamalcualiztli*, from amaranth (Anderson and Dibble 1950-1980, bk. 2, 33). Sahagún's informants also refer to them as "precious green stone tamales." The name reflects the value placed on the dish, since both *precious* and *green* were usually applied to greenstone or jade, considered extremely valuable in Mesoamerica. The tamales were also served spicy and hot, perhaps a reference to both fire and the god Xiuhtecuhtli. The dish may also reflect the harvesting sequence since amaranth was harvested prior to the maize crop. Another illustration of special food preparations connected to specific veintenas was the Etzalcualiztli festival, literally the "Eating of Etzalli," a gruel or porridge of maize and beans that Sahagún describes as "a delicious food, which they liked well" (Anderson and Dibbel 1950-1980, bk. 2, 11) The consumption of this dish became a major activity in this ceremony that honored the fertility god Tlaloc. These special dishes were made of staple crops that were often intercropped with one another, amaranth, maize, and beans. They were everyday foods but they acquired a sacred dimension by being the focus of a veintena ceremony.

There were other ways in which food was used throughout the veintena festivals. Gathering food could be a component of a feast, as illustrated by the Izcalli celebration to the gods Xiuhtecuhtli and Tlaloc. Before the feast began, the young men went on a hunt to ensure that there were plenty of animals for offerings given during the feast (Anderson and Dibble 1950-1980, bk. 2, 33). Hunting itself was the major activity during Quecholli ("Precious Feather") in honor of Mixcoatl, the god of the hunt. In this veintena the method of obtaining the necessary food items for consumption and offerings reflects the specific deity being honored. In discussing the hunt, Sahagún notes:

> Next day, at dawn, all forthwith broke fast and set out for the country and formed a great wing, wherewith they surrounded many animals—deer, rabbit, and other animals—and little by little they kept coming together until they rounded up all of them. Then they attacked and hunted, each one what he could (Anderson and Dibble 1950-1980, bk. 2, 26).

This quote also points to another use of food in veintena ceremonies, that of food abstinence. Fasting is mentioned in seven of the eighteen feasts in Book 2: Tlacaxipehualiztli ("Flaying of Men"), Hueytozoztli, Toxcatl ("Dry Thing"), Etzalcualiztli, Hueytecuilhuitl, Quecholli, and Panquetzaliztli ("Raising of Banners"). In many cases abstaining from food was a prelude to feasting and was performed by both priests and participants. During Panquetzaliztli the priests fasted for forty days, but Sahagún's informants note that during Tlacaxipehualiztli, everyone, including children, fasted (Sullivan 1997:65).

Food restriction also took a different form in some veintenas. During Hueytecuilhuitl, food was given to all poor men and women in honor of the maize goddess; but if anyone was caught taking more than his or her share that person would be "mishandled" and be sent away from the feast empty-handed (Anderson and Dibble 1950-1980, bk. 2, 14). Sahagún's informants state:

> And no one cheated with the tamales. But if they saw anyone try to cheat with the tamales, if it was seen, they struck him; they struck him repeatedly, leaving marks on him with a cord made of reeds.

During the celebrations to Huitzilopochtli, only the old men and women were allowed to drink pulque; if anyone else drank, that person would be punished. In keeping with the characteristics of a feast, food restrictions allowed for order and sequence; anyone not following these regulations was seen as disruptive to the feast (and the rituals to the honored deity) and had to be dealt with severely.

In other ceremonies food was used to make deity images. Book 2 describes six veintenas in which dough images were made: Hueytozoztli, Toxcatl, Xocotlhuetzi ("Xocotl Falls"), Tepeihuitl ("Hill Feast Day"), Panquetzalitzli, and Atemoztli ("Descent of Water"). Images

were not always created to represent the specific deity being honored but rather to connect the various associations of that particular god or goddess. For example, in the feast honoring the rain gods during the month of Atemoztli, Sahagún's informants recount that images of mountains were made from dough and called *tzoalli* (Anderson and Dibble 1950-1980, bk. 2, 30). The Aztec audience would have known that the mountain tops were the dwelling places of the rain gods. Book 2 provides descriptive details of the images:

> They fashioned for them their teeth of squash seeds, and their eyes of some beans which are named *aiecotl*. These images were divided into parts, their heads and "hearts" were removed, and those present in the feast ate them.

The sacrificing and symbolic eating of the flesh of the gods mimicked feasting during *Tlacaxipehualiztli*, in honor of Xipe Totec, in which the actual flesh of sacrificed victims was eaten. In other cases, such as in the month of *Hueypachtli* when the rain gods were honored, Sahagún mentions that dough was used to cover images made from wood (Anderson and Dibble 1950-1980, bk. 2, 9).

Human sacrifice was another component of many of the veintena ceremonies and food was connected to these offerings in different ways. The sacrifices performed during veintenas were a form of "debt-payment," a term Sahagún's informants use repeatedly in their descriptions. It represents a way in which the Aztecs tried to keep a cosmic balance by giving to the gods the most precious substance available, human blood, in return for all the things the gods provided them with. In addition to maintaining a reciprocal relationship with the gods, the blood of humans was seen as the source for the continuation of life. This complementary view of life and death was ingrained in Aztec thought and enacted in veintena ceremonies. Many veintenas included sacrifices to deities that were responsible for the preservation of life. For example, throughout the year human sacrifices were offered to the deities associated with the sun, so that each day would begin again and time would continue. Some veintenas in which human sacrifices were offered to deities associated with the sun include Panquetzaliztli, Toxcatl, and Tlacaxipehualiztli. Human sacrifices were intended to strengthen the sun so it could make its daily journey.

Food played a significant role in veintenas that incorporated human sacrifice. In some veintenas the sacrificial victim was offered food or drink, such as during Toxcatl in honor of Tezcatlipoca. Often food was used as a prelude or conclusion to sacrifices being offered. This is evident in the feast of Etzalqualiztl, in honor of the rain gods, in which a special gruel was eaten by all, including the victims to be sacrificed. In other cases, such as during Tlacaxipehualiztli in honor of Xipe Totec and Tepeilhuitl in honor of the rain gods, the flesh of sacrificed victims was mixed with food, creating a sacred meal of maize and human flesh for those who consumed the dish.

Consumption, whether of dough images, foodstuffs, or human flesh, thus played a central role in veintena ceremonies. The act of eating is a transformative act: it changes foodstuffs into the very energy needed to sustain life. In addition, sacrifices, whether of foods or flesh, allowed the gods to eat so they, too, could have the energy to continue with their tasks. Consumption itself was a ritual that exchanged energy and life-giving abilities. Davíd Carrasco refers to this as "transferability," an exchange between the vital forces of humans and the realms and personalities of the gods (Carrasco 1999:179). As veintena participants ate the dough images, foodstuffs, or flesh, they were symbolically taking part in a transformation: an *eating* of the gods that connected them with the cycle of the cosmos. Participants symbolically ate the gods, and in doing so, they were consuming nature and even humanity as well. They were now part of the cosmic cycle of life.

In several veintena ceremonies, food was transformed into a deadly metaphor. During the ceremony of Atlcahualo ("Ceasing of Water"), held in honor of the rain god Tlaloc, victims were gathered for the gladiatorial sacrifices for upcoming celebrations. Sahagún's informants record that they were brought to Xipe Totec's temple, and there the priests:

> . . . intimated to them how they were to die; they tore out their hearts; yet they were only putting them to the test. It was with the use of tortillas of ground corn which had not been softened with lime, or "Yopi"—tortillas, that they tore their hearts from them (Anderson and Dibble 1950-1980, bk. 2, 45).

In the ceremony tortillas were transformed into sacrificial knives; thus, the sacrificial victims experienced a symbolic killing through the use of food.

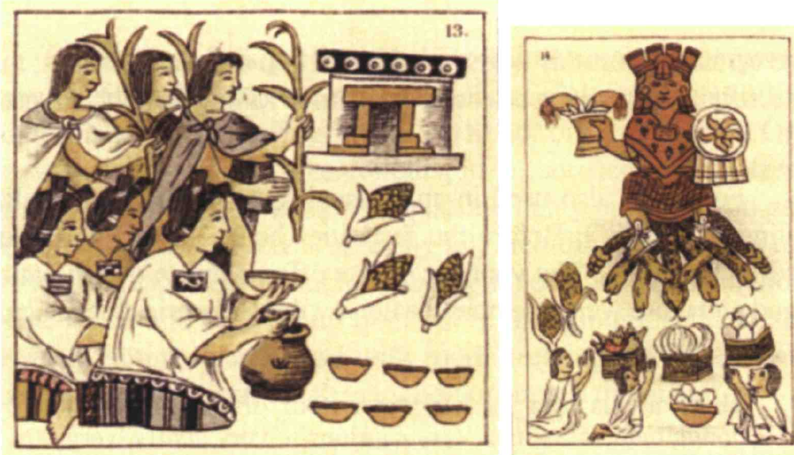
Food was also used in an unusual form during Etzalqualiztli ("Eating of Etzalli"). Before the festivities began, the Tlaloc priests fasted for four days. The younger priests offered maize dough balls to the god and these were eventually eaten by the older priests. Sahagún's informants write:

> There in his turn he laid down four offering-balls of dough made of maize. Very cautiously, very gently, very warily he placed them (Anderson and Dibble 1950-1980, bk. 2, 80).

These dough balls could not be moved; if they rolled and were spoiled, the younger priests were seized by the older priests. Also offered by the young priests were four large tomatoes or four green chillies. The three foods offered were basic ingredients in everyday meals, yet during Etzalqualiztli they were transformed into powerful offerings. The number of offerings might also have been associated with the four cardinal directions and, therefore, with the cosmos. Like the use of tortillas in the Atlcaualo celebration, there was a tension and threat in the use of food in Etzalqualiztli. While food restriction was certainly common during veintena festivals, the use of food in Atlcaualo and Etzalqualiztli seems particularly ominous, with severe consequences for those who did not follow procedures accordingly.

Ceremonies in Honor of the Maize Deities

Several veintenas directly honored the maize deities, such as Hueytozoztli and Hueytecuitl; others indirectly celebrated them. During Hueytozoztli, which celebrated the maize gods Centeotl and Chicomecoatl as well as the Tlaloque (rain gods), fasting and the gathering of food took place several days before the actual ceremony. Sahagún's informants relate that young stalks of maize were collected and garnished with flowers, then placed before the images of the maize gods in the various temples (Anderson and Dibble 1950-1980, bk. 2, 80). In addition to these offerings, the maize gods were also offered foodstuffs, al-



Figures 1 and 2. Offerings at the temple of Chicomecoatl (left) and offerings to the Chicomecoatl image (right); both from Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, Book 2, figs. 13 and 14, respectively. Courtesy of the University of Utah Press.

though these are not specified in the text. His informants do note that images made from dough or *tzoalli* were offered to the maize goddess Chicomecoatl, along with all types of maize, beans, and chia.

The corresponding images are noteworthy. The first illustrates the gathering of the stalks and the presentation at the temple (fig. 1). At the upper left corner of the image is a temple. A group of Aztecs is shown to the left of the building and closer to the viewer. The group is made up of three men who stand and hold corn stalks in their hands and three women who sit in front of the men. Two of the women are partly hidden since the artist has used an overlapping technique to show European perspective. The fully visible woman holds in her hands two bowls and appears to be using one of them to pour food or drink into the other. A large ceramic vessel stands before her. To the right of the group are offerings placed in front of the temple: several maize cobs and bowls, most likely filled with whatever foodstuff is in the ceramic vessel.

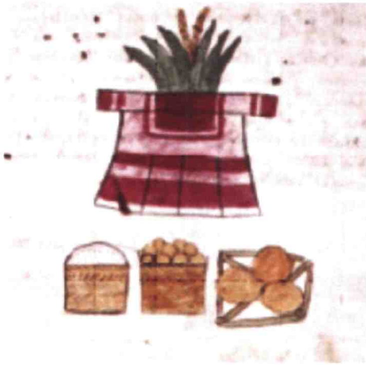


Figure 3. Abstract representation of maize deity in Ochpaniztli ceremony; from the *Codex Magliabechiano*. Courtesy of ADEVA.

In the second image Chicomecoatl dominates the scene, with worshipers shown disproportionately smaller than the deity (fig. 2). The goddess is placed in the center, filling up most of the picture plane. She wears a headdress, a long skirt, and a *quechquemitl*, the triangular upper garment often associated with Aztec goddesses (Anawalt 1982:41). In her hands she carries the symbols of her fertility: a shield decorated with a painted flower and a vessel containing two large maize cobs. From between her legs slither seven serpents, symbols of fertility and a literal reference to her calendric name, Seven Serpent. In front of her kneel three male worshipers with their hands extending towards her. Between them are three baskets and one bowl laden with food, and two large maize cobs appear at the deity's right side. Although Sahagún's informants do not mention the specific foods in the text, the images shows that red and green chili peppers, flat tortillas, round maize dough balls, maize kernels, and maize cobs were being offered to the goddess.

In the *Codex Magliabechiano* the ceremony is represented minimally and significantly in the form of food offerings (fig. 3). A maize stalk adorned with painted paper represents a visual code for the goddess, since in the feast for Xilonen the young maize goddess wears a very similar garment. The garment is a *quemitl*, a bib-like item that was tied around the neck of deity images (Anawalt 1984:166-167). In front of the personified stalk are two baskets and one flat dish. The baskets hold maize kernels and maize dough balls, respectively, and the dish contains three tortillas. It is interesting to observe that the scene, while

abbreviated, focuses on maize and its transition from raw material into finished product, a process by which it became a food basic in the Mesoamerican diet. This simple sequence of food alterations would echo the various cosmic transformations as expressed through Aztec creation myths and would also serve as a reminder to the Aztec ritual performer of his or her catalytic involvement in food's transformation from raw material into cooked or prepared foodstuffs. Maize, for example, needed constant human intervention from cultivation to consumption; therefore the Aztec cosmos and the Aztec man were inextricably linked to maize; one could not survive without the other.

Other accounts of *Hueytecuihuitl*, in honor of Xilonen, detail an incredible array of food. Durán, in his *Book of the Gods and Rites*, notes:

> Then was brought forth the sumptuous food which had been prepared for each king [to offer the god]: turkeys and their hens and game with a number of different kinds of bread. . . They offered so much food that those who tell this story (they are men who actually saw these things) affirm that the food was so plentiful—stews, breads, and chocolate in the native style (Heyden 1994:158).

In addition to the foods offered, Durán also mentions another use of food in the ceremony. In recording the actions of the woman who was going to be sacrificed to Chicomecoatl, he notes that she was placed on a litter that was decorated with ears of corn, chili, and squash. During the veintena celebrations, food was thus used as an adornment, decorating architecture, sculpture, and people. In the feast, food was not only symbolically embodied by the female impersonator, but it physically enveloped the sacrificial victim.

Lavish food offerings were especially appropriate in Hueytecuilhuitl. Sahagún's informants record that for eight days before the feast everyone was fed:

> In the morning they gave them to drink a kind of gruel which they call *chienpinolli*. Each one drank as much as he wished. And at noon they placed all in order, seated in

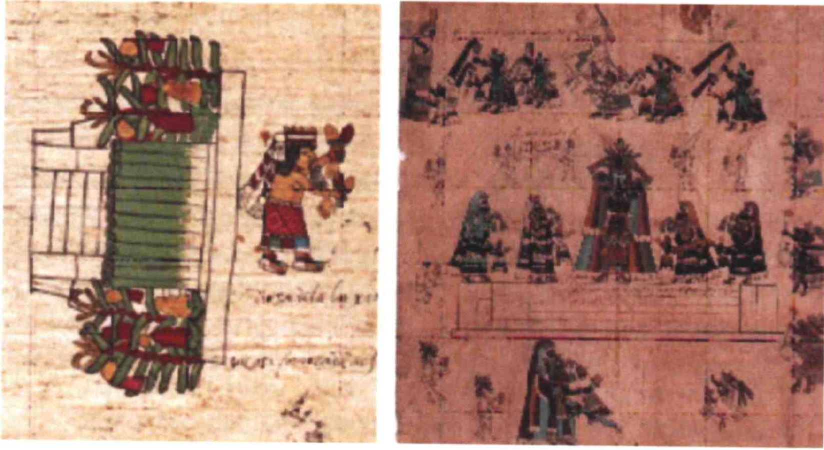
> rows, and they gave them tamales. (Anderson and Dibble 1950-1980, bk. 2, 14)

Sahagún's artists illustrate the scene as well; two groups of people eating from several baskets and vessels. The huddled figures at the left in the image wear scant clothing. The group on the right, sitting in front of a building, is larger in size and wears the robes of the nobility. Thus both commoners and the elite feasted, even if the poor ate separately. Sahagún's informants describe the sumptuous array of tamales that were eaten:

> They were perchance tamales of maize treated with lime, or tamales made with fruit; some were tamales of maize blossoms, some were tamales with twisted ends, some were honey tamales. And of the twisted-end tamales some had grains of maize, some had green beans and grains of maize (Anderson and Dibble 1950-1980, bk. 2, 97).

This quote illustrates the tremendous amount of preparation involved in these ceremonies. Tortillas of green maize and cooked amaranth greens were eaten as well, as would be fitting for a celebration of the young maize goddess whose domain included the young and tender stages of maize and other plants. In the Aztec agricultural calendar, amaranth was harvested before maize, a connection reinforced in the ceremony.

Maize and maize deities are also important to veintenas in which other fertility deities were honored. One of the most complex ceremonies was Ochpaniztli ("Road Sweeping") held in honor of the earth goddess Toci ("Our Grandmother"). The ceremony included the sacrifice of several young women. Ritual performances described by sixteenth-century sources demonstrate that women were sacrificed in one-third of the yearly festivals (Carrasco 1999:7). As living symbols of fertility they were the favorite offerings to the earth mother deities. One of the first sacrifices that occurred in Ochpaniztli was the decapitation of a young woman who was dressed as the goddess Toci (Anderson and Dibble 1950-1980, bk. 2, 118-126). The skin of this sacrificed female



Figures 4 and 5. Deity impersonator at Ochpaniztli ceremony (left) and Chicomecoatl impersonator with other priests (right); both from the *Codex Borbonicus*. Courtesy of ADEVA.

was then flayed and worn by a priest, with the exception of the leg that was given to another priest who took on the guise of Centeotl, the god of maize and the son of Toci.

Other aspects of Ochpaniztli were mock battles, dancing, feasting, and food offerings. The priests, some dressed in the garb of the maize goddess Chicomecoatl, conducted rituals in which food was the major component. Sahagún records:

> Then they came forth from their temples. They strewed seeds [of maize] there at [what was called] the banquet table of the devil [Uitzilopochtli (sic), a small pyramid which was] not very high. And when they had climbed up, then they flung forth, they each dispersed here, they each scattered here on the people the seeds—white maize grains, yellow maize grains, black, red; and squash seeds (Anderson and Dibble 1950-1980, bk. 2, 124).

Maize takes on a cosmic role as it is first offered to Huitzilopochtli, patron god of the Aztecs, and then dispersed to participants. The "raining down" of food from the temple tops would have certainly been understood as a symbol of the abundance that various sacrifices would have brought about.

In contrast, Sahagún's informants do not illustrate this scene but focus instead on the singing and dancing that occurred at the ceremony. The *Codex Borbonicus* images, however, offer enlightening comparisons. It should be noted that the account of the festival in the Borbonicus differs considerably from accounts recorded by Sahagún and Durán, a distinction that might be due to regional differences. One scene shows a priest wearing the flayed skin of a sacrificial victim as he exits a temple (fig. 4). This deity impersonator has been identified as Tlazolteotl ("Goddess of Filth"), who is often portrayed wearing quail feathers or the entire bird as an ornament (Anawalt 1982:53). The *Borbonicus* artist depicts the deity with a bird in its mouth, an elaborate headdress, a skirt wrapped around the waist, and the flayed skin of a female sacrificial victim around his shoulders. The flayed skin is evident by the breasts that hang loosely and the victim's hands that dangle from the wrists of the priest who wears the skin. The deity impersonator holds in his hands large maize cobs. In addition, the temple from which he exits is lavishly adorned with large cobs.

Another scene of the Ochpaniztli ceremony depicts a priest in the guise of Chicomecoatl-Tlazolteotl wearing the flayed skin of a sacrificial victim (fig. 5). This scene represents a very complex segment of the ceremony, yet the importance of food in the ritual is quite evident. In the center atop a stepped pyramid is the fertility goddess, who can be identified by the elaborate *amacalli* or "house of paper" on her head. The *amacalli* is typical of the maize goddess Chicomecoatl, but the quail in her mouth, is a feature of the goddess Tlazolteotl. She wears a long skirt and a *quechquemitl* on her upper torso. The *quechquemitl* is connected to ritual use in Aztec culture and specifically with fertility deities. While other scholars have argued for a Teotihuacan origin of the costume, Patricia Anawalt suggests a Gulf Coast location, the fertile region of the Huastecs (Anawalt 1984:47-51). Anawalt also notes that Central Mexicans associated the Huastecs with the abundance of food, cotton (a highly valued commodity by the Aztecs), and fertility. The image seconds this Huastec connection by incorporating several figures dressed as Huastecs surrounding the temple. The male figures are naked with the exception of a loin cloth; they have painted black stripes on their bodies and wear the conical hat associated with the Huastecs. In

their hands are two objects: a broom and an extended phallus. Anawalt has argued for a connection with fertility in the erotic sense; however, I would argue that the imagery is also about the fertility of the earth and the promised abundance of food. According to an Aztec myth in the *Codex Boturini*, it was the Huastecs who taught them how to make pulque; the corresponding images show two Aztec men using sticks to pierce the center or *heart* of the plant and using the hollow stick to suck the juice stored in the plant (Pérez Bolde 1980:8). This liquid would later be fermented to make pulque. In Aztec historiography the Huastecs appear again; during the five years of famine in Central Mexico during the mid 1400s, the Aztecs turned to the Huastecs for supplies of food (Davies 1974:91-94).

The association with abundant food is certainly emphasized. In the first image (fig. 4), abundance is seen not only in the number of maize cobs decorating the temple but in their size as well: they are plentiful and large. In the second image (fig. 5), although full of figures and activity, it is the center figure of the maize goddess that captures the viewer's attention. The goddess, a powerful combination of two deities connected with food and the earth, stands frontally, facing the viewer. She is flanked by four other figures, identified by Sahagún's informants as the "Chicomecoatl offering priestesses" (Anderson and Dibble 1950-1980, bk. 2, 124). They hold maize cobs and incense bags in their hands.

The Ochpaniztli depictions in the *Borbonicus* continue with an actual scene of human sacrifice, and perhaps the image can be read as a prelude to the first two already discussed. This active scene is the strongest argument for a food and earth connection in addition to sexual fertility. Although Sahagún's informants note that Tlazolteotl "was mistress of lust and debauchery," she was also responsible for "eating away" the sins of man (Carrasco 1999:178). Again, consumption allows for the transfer of energy between gods and humans. The balance necessary to create such a restoration is reiterated in the ceremonies

through the intimate connection of food and sacrifice, literally, a giving to and taking from the earth.

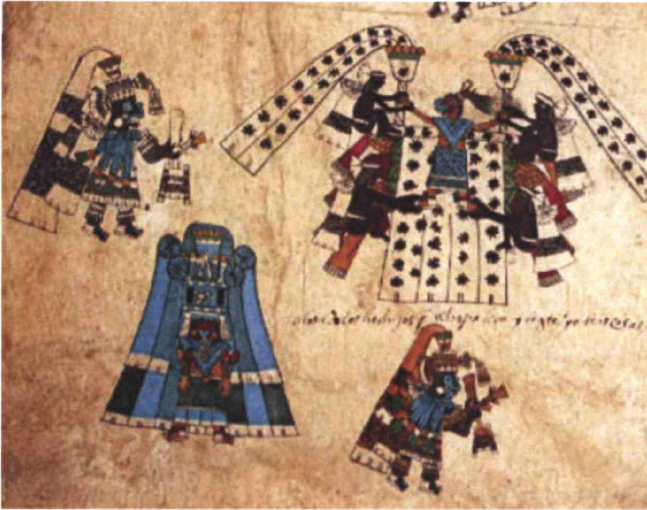


Figure 6. Sacrifice of deity impersonator during Ochpaniztli ceremony; from the *Codex Borbonicus.*Courtesy of ADEVA.

In the scene the goddess impersonator lies on an altar while four priests tie her down (fig. 6). The goddess wears the same wrapped skirt as the deity impersonator in Figures 4 and 5. This time, however, she also wears a *quechquemitl* over her shoulders.

The altar on which the deity impersonator lies is in the shape of a large *quemitl*, the bib-like item that has been identified as one of four costumes associated with human sacrifice, which here is decorated with rubber and large maize cobs. The decoration of the altar is significant. It appears again in the *Borbonicus,* but this time as a stand-in for the image of the fertility goddess (fig. 7). Here the deity *is* the costume: painted paper decorated with rubber and adorned with maize cobs of various colors.

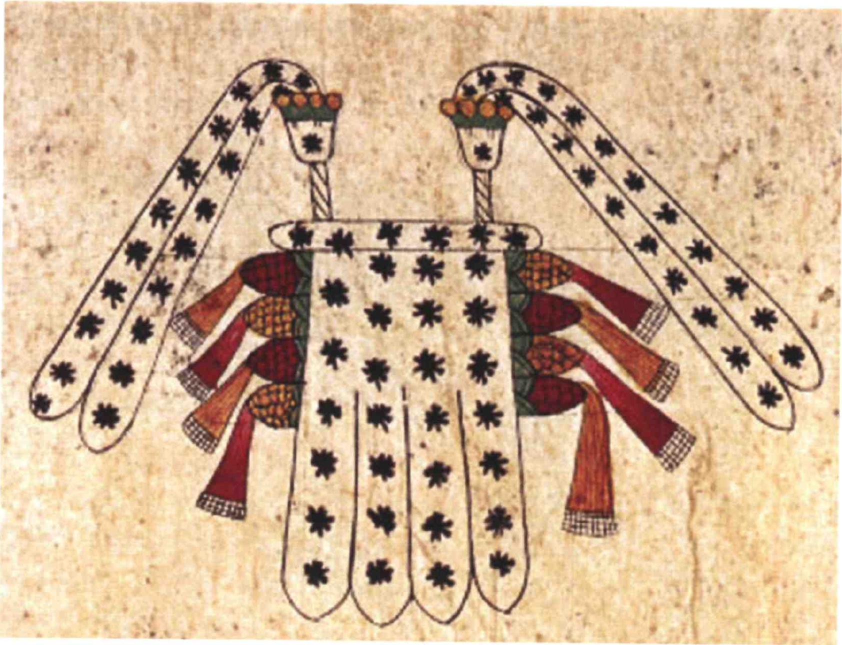


Figure 7. Abstract representation of maize deity in Ochpaniztli ceremony; detail from the *Codex Borbonicus*. Courtesy of ADEVA.

Conclusion

In noting the food eaten during the veintena ceremonies, Spanish friar Diego Durán writes, "I believe that the special food eaten on each feast was consumed in order to assure that this type of food [would not] be wanting at any time" (Heyden 1994:466). This statement shows that he was very much aware of the symbolic connection between the food consumed and the ceremonies performed. Yet the use of food by the Aztecs in these ceremonies is much more varied, multi-layered, and complex than merely assuring a good harvest or an abundance of food. While these basic needs were certainly part of the rituals performed, in the veintena ceremonies food became part of the cosmic realm, not only as a necessity for the continuation of life, but in its transformation from the tangible into the abstract. For example, food was related to the cosmos and the four cardinal directions during Etzalqualiztli, which included four maize balls, four chilies, and four tomatoes. In their

association with the cardinal directions and as offerings to the gods, these staples were transformed into cosmic foods.

As is evident in the overview of the celebrations mentioned by Sahagún's informants, food was used in veintena rituals in many ways. Some feasts mandated that special meals be prepared. These special dishes sometimes referenced specific deities in such feasts as Izcalli, in which a hot sauce was prepared in honor of the fire god Xiuhtecuhtli. Other special meals referenced a harvesting sequence or technique, such as the Etzalcualiztli ceremony in which two basic staples that were routinely intercropped, beans and maize, were combined to make a special dish. In addition to preparing special meals, food served as an adornment, often used to decorate sculpture, architecture, and participants. In the feast Hueytecuitl honoring the maize goddess Chicomecoatl, food was used to decorate temples, deity impersonators, and the litter in which the goddess was carried. Here food enveloped the physical scene to such an extent that the viewer could not overlook its specific role in the veintena; indeed, the ritual space was transformed with the use of food.

While these examples certainly illustrate the tangible use of food during some veintena celebrations, others illustrate a symbolic or abstract use of food. During Huetozoztli maize was offered as maize kernels, dough balls, and tortillas (fig. 6). This transformation from raw to prepared material is significant because it illustrates a cycle of continuous change. Transformation is a theme prevalent in Aztec thought and is reiterated in the veintenas, especially in ceremonies where human or dough *flesh* was eaten. Such consumption illustrates the transformation of food and the transformative power of food.

Food was also used as a threat in some veintena ceremonies. In the celebration to Tlaloc in Atlcahualo, hardened tortillas were used to psychologically torture future sacrifice victims. In this ceremony food was transformed into a weapon used to sacrifice captives. In rituals honoring Xipe Totec, food was mixed with the actual flesh of sacrificial victims. Both food and flesh took on a powerful role, perhaps becoming embodiments of the cosmic itself. Aztecs participating in or observing these festivals would have easily understood the purpose of these trans-

formations. Modern viewers may find it difficult to interpret the original meaning of some of these sanguinary and esoteric rituals, but the images help us see that through the medium of food the Aztecs intended to communicate that something transformative was taking place.

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