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**THE PRE-CONQUEST AZTEC STATE  
A COMPARISON BETWEEN  
PROGRESSIVE EVOLUTIONISTS AND  
OTHER HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS**

It is fortunate for the researcher that the Aztecs possess such a strong historical consciousness that they recorded the "historical events of each year... by day, month and hour". Therefore, the earliest sources on the condition of the Aztec state in the pre-conquest era are derived from the writings of the Aztecs themselves. These historical documents extend far back into the past and delve deeply into the traditions, customs and religions of the Nahuatl people. It was the great leader Itzcoatl who was the fourth ruler and actually the first great Aztec conqueror to whom we are indebted for many of the surviving pieces of data. His purpose, however, was not one which historians would approve. In the earliest known documents the Aztecs were assigned a rather secondary role. Under the rule of Itzcoatl, however, the entire accumulation of historical manuscripts were burned, "for it containeth many falsehoods" (Anderson and Dibble, 1954, p. 191). Itzcoatl was a great statesman as well as a warrior of renown. At the beginning of his reign he had Aztec history rewritten to conform with the multiple viewpoints of religious imperialism and nationalism which he favored. In the process of the rewriting of the history of the Nahuatl peoples, the position of the Aztecs was changed to one of ascendancy. The new histories demonstrated that the Aztecs were the oldest and certainly the most illustrious families in the land. It was the purpose of Itzcoatl to have the new histories stress the notion that the Aztecs were a superior people destined to rule over all others (Caso, 1954, p. 15-27; Covarrubias, 1957, p. 316; León-Portilla, 1963, p. 154, 155, 160-161).

Any attempt on the part of the investigator to reconstruct an accurate picture of the government of the Aztec peoples and Mexico City, particularly that period which coincides with the arrival

of the Europeans, will find himself in deep water. It has been observed that even as late as today, "the Indian of today still arms himself with dubious response and an inert attitude before the most simple question about his daily life. For him the racial pact of silence before the white invader is still valid" (Noriega, 1959). Presently we are left only with the obviously biased chronicles of the Spanish historians who accompanied Cortes. We know practically nothing of the Aztec historians who wrote perfectly legible and readable manuscripts, most of which were destroyed. It can be said with some authority that the Aztecs had well planned political activity within a military theocratic system and that this was perhaps one of the most important reasons for their rapid development into a city-state. As it was to be expected, the Spanish conquerors viewed the exterior signs of government from the standpoint of European governmental systems of that period. As a consequence, the terminology that we use today reflects the nomenclature of European feudalism.

The development of the beautiful and elegant city of Tenochtitlan grew out of two centuries of warfare and building. It was almost sixty years after the founding of that city that the Aztecs launched their formal political career. It can be said with some assurance that not all elements of the Aztec people subscribed to the dominant outlook which was particularly stressed in the histories that were written under the direction of Itzcoatl. Certainly the merchants, for example, had a far greater desire to accumulate wealth than fight Holy wars. Nevertheless, the view that war and conquests were both good and necessary is the one that remains to us in the literature (Soustelle, 1962, p. 58, 66, 210). Early Spanish writings at the time of the conquest refer to the "natural rudeness and inferiority of the Indians" (Hanke, 1959, p. 44; Motolinia, 1950, p. 209; Prescott, 1886, p. 42). Both the early Spanish as well as the Indian historians interpreted the Aztec government in terms of the Spanish feudal system. Out of this reasoning come the interpretation which has lasted perhaps longer than any other. Indeed, this interpretation is still supported today by a sizable number of scholars, and may be called the feudal-imperialist's theory. The feudal-imperialists hold that the Aztec culture was comparable to that of medieval Europe. They feel the

evidence supports a view of the Aztec empire as inferring domination by military or theocratic aristocracy. The later theories of a democratic, tribal Aztec society are rejected by these people as having insufficient evidence mainly to support such a theory. According to the feudal-imperialist's view, Aztec society stretched from commoner to emperor through a complicated hierarchy of lesser and greater nobility, many of whom possessed very special privileges. Those who were ennobled ruled private hereditary estates which were worked by serfs and they functioned quite normally as feudal lords. The king was, however, elected as there were very large numbers of autonomous tributary provinces held in vassalage to the city-state. This elected monarch could be distinguished as an emperor during his reign. The common people had no effective voice or representation in the government and they had few privileges. The feudal-imperialist's viewpoint is always defined as the period of Aztec empire building, that is, that period in their history after 1430 (Moreno, 1931, p. 2, 18; Caso, 1954, p. 22, 27; Wolf, 1959, p. 137, 141-142, 149; White, 1940, p. 32; Sahagún, 1961, p. 15-22; López Austin, 1961, p. 21-52; Caso, 1963, p. 863-878).

The familiarity of the early Spanish historians with the feudal system or the feudal-imperialist's system in Europe made it very easy for them to interpret the Aztec's government by such standards, but they did not leave off at this point and that gives rise to a second theory which developed out of this concept. Some of the early authorities saw an analogy between the Roman and Aztec cultures. They, therefore, compared the Aztec's state to the Roman Empire and this gave rise to some very important political implications in the early days (Solis, 1738, p. 136; Phelan, 1956, p. 110-111). The analogy between Roman and Aztec society formulated as part of an attempt by some of the early religious orders to demonstrate that the Indians were capable of intellectual achievements equal to that of Europeans. Father Torquemada as early as 1615 made this comparison on a systematic and indeed overwhelming scale. The implications of this were that the Aztecs represented the classical antiquity of the New World. Later on historians included Aztec deities in this concept. "In an atmosphere suggestive of the Gods of the Greeks and the

Romans [and] the Aztecs took on the virtues of heroic Roman emperors" (Phelan, 1961, p. 761).

The next evolutionary step in the development of theories relating to Aztec society and government was the central-imperialist's interpretation (Feldman, 1966, p. 171). The elements which led to this new interpretation, which is one that has achieved great popularity in Mexico, began with the assumption of an Aztec classical antiquity. Gradually out of this assumption Spanish colonial intellectuals developed a philosophy in which they began to demand a return to Aztec virtues and in addition the restoration of the Aztec Empire. The return, of course, to these classic virtues would not bring about any real revival of Aztec culture nor was it really desired, but "this platform of ideas . . . provided a neat though historically dubious rationale for independence . . ." When Mexican independence did come about, this tendency to glorify the Aztec died out. There was some attempt after the 1910 Mexican revolution to revive it and the idea remains of some importance in modern Mexican historiography (Phelan, 1961, p. 768-769; Covarrubias, 1957, p. 312, 320; Petróleos Mexicanos, 1961, p. 23; Guzmán, 1958, p. 58-64). It should be noted that Alfonso Trueba disagrees strongly with this view and attacked this position in his *Doña Eulalia, el mestizo y otros temas* (Trueba, 1959, p. 7-10).

Following this period the central-imperialist's interpretation came to the fore and, as I have said, achieved great popularity in Mexico. This view considered the Aztec state to have been either an incipient or fully developed empire. This empire theoretically was ruled by an absolute monarch who established colonies, controlled a number of provinces for the purpose of tribute, established garrisons and abolished local autonomy. Under this system separate and special classes existed. There was a nobility based on merit rather than hereditary rights. Consequently, any commoner if he was able could advance through the class stratum even to the highest rank. According to this viewpoint the emperor or king was not elected by either the people or the nobility; instead a council previously chosen by the former emperor from members of his family made up the group of electors (Caso, 1954, p. 20; Caso, 1958, p. 94; Soustelle, 1962, p.45).

George C. Vaillant saw the foundations of the Aztec state as preceding from an organization where the Head of State was a chief of lineage who also performed ecclesiastical functions. He says that within this state craftsmanship was highly skilled and trade flourished. The later produced raw materials for the artisans. The product of the artisans, however, was directed toward religion and ritual rather than the accumulation or creation of personal wealth. According to Vaillant, therefore, religion for the Aztecs was an elaborate polythesism based on nature worship with a few Gods singled out for special adoration. These, in turn, brought the full force of the divine powers "to aid man in his life on earth" (Vaillant, 1944, p. 97). After a period of migration under the governmental system described before, the Tenochcas evolved into the condition of a feudal tributary as a result of their being conquered by a neighboring group. The development into an independent state, he says, did not come about until there was a definite change of attitude which shifted them psychologically from a group sense of inferiority to a feeling of superiority. This was brought about by the leadership of Itzcoatl, the fourth Tenochcan chief.

About 1300 there was a split in tribal continuity when the early Aztecs were defeated at Chapultepec. A number of the tribe escaped to the islands in the lake and founded a town around 1325. The town was ruled under a tribal council and elected main chiefs presumably. The other group, who were in a sense captured, were taken to Tizapan by the victors where they were placed in a feudal status as the vassals of Culhuacan. The decline of Culhuacan took place sometime between 1351 and 1403. The Aztecs then rejoined the group on the islands and the "stone city" of Tenochtitlan was constructed. With the ascendancy of Itzcoatl privilege and honor in the society was viewed as rank, but not class in the hereditary sense. As wealth did exist, the ownership of property in the form of the right to use land, tools and other possessions did create a social and economic stratification. According to Vaillant, "in theory and practice Aztec society was democratic and the communal ownership of productive property was its economic base". The ladder to power and the rank attained was measured by the amount of tribal service one

could perform. If a man demonstrated superior skills, wisdom or judgement, he could well be elected a clan representative to the tribal council or even the chief. One of the other routes to rank and high social position would be that of the Priest or Medicine Man. The learning of magic rituals with which to placate the Gods playing such an important roll in the society offered privileges and prestige to the man who knew these practices.

The semi-materialistic examination of history, particularly relating to the Aztecs made by Vaillant had its origins in the latter part of the 19th century. Frederick Engels, compatriot and close friend of Karl Marx, after having made a careful study of Lewis H. Morgan's pioneering work *Ancient Society* concluded that both Morgan and Marx had independently developed the materialistic concept of history. Engels felt that both Marx and Morgan, in the main points, had arrived at the same conclusions. According to the materialistic concept of history, the determining factor is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of the immediate essentials of life. This leads, of course, to a positive social organization and further to the structure of the state and organization control of the state. This control extends also to the entities within the state. The theory behind this is, quite simply, that the social organization under which a people in any historical time, regardless of the particular country in which they live, is determined by the two kinds of production. The first being the production of the means for existence, that is, the construction of tools, the gathering of food, making clothing, constructing dwellings, etc. The other aspect being the propagation of the species itself. The societal organization then can be determined by what stage of development there is of labor on one hand, and of the family on the other. This type of society would be based on kinship groups. The productivity, therefore, of its labor within the kinship group increasingly develops. As this increase occurs, private wealth is accumulated in the form of property and articles of exchange. Engels sees these differences as the elements that create class antagonisms. When these antagonisms reach a stage where there is a total incompatibility between new developing conditions and the old social order there is a complete upheaval. The kinship society or the old society

is broken up. In its place will appear a new society and with this society the control is centered in the state (Engels, 1942, p. 5-6). With some modification it is from this background, then, that later writers such as Vaillant began to interpret Aztec society.

The progressive cultural evolutionist interpretation of the Aztec state developed out of the theories of biological evolution that arose in the 19th century. It was not difficult for such people as Marx, Engels, Bandelier and Morgan to see culture as an evolutionary and progressive entity. As a consequence, the idea of cultural evolution developed shortly after the early works on biological evolution were published. One of the earliest theories that lay the foundation for the basis of such reasoning was the idea that European civilization was the ultimate toward which all cultures were supposedly evolving. Another postulate was that this was being done by a single universal sequence of stages.

Adolph F. Bandelier was one of the first advocates of this school of thought. His relationship with Morgan influenced his reasoning along these lines to a great extent. The Indians that Morgan had studied demonstrated a lack of the attributes of a "state" according to the progressive evolutionist theory. One of the primary stages of development was that of the classless, tribal, democratic, and communal "society" which was based on personal relationship. Another of these stages was the "state" and this was based on property relationships. It was precisely on the lack of property relationships that Bandelier made the assumption, along with Morgan and Engels, that the Iroquois "nation" did not have the attributes of a "state". The concept was then applied to all cultures indigenous to the Western Hemisphere. Progressive evolutionists have adhered to this view to the present time (Bandelier, 1880, p. 557-699; Moreno, 1931, p. 3; White, 1940, p. 52; Morgan, 1877, p. 186-214; Engels, 1942, p. 5-90).

One of the most famous advocates of the progressive evolutionist concept was Frederick Engels. In a number of his publications he discussed the construction of a "state" (Engels, 1937, p. 10, 140; Marx and Engels, 1963, p. 54-57, 69-102). In reference to Aztec government, Engels, following the concepts of Morgan, refers to the Aztec ruler as a "democratically elected official".

Engels felt that the Aztec ruler did not live in a palace but in a "joint-tenement house . . . occupied on equal terms by a hundred other families in common with his own". The Aztec ruler was nothing more or less than an elected official who was the chief of a tribal confederacy and that this confederacy had as yet not reached a high enough stage of evolutionary development sufficient to be called a "state" by the progressive evolutionist definition (Vaillant, 1960, p. 119; Engels, 1942, p. 96; Negrete, 1958, p. 116).

The answer of the progressive evolutionary theorists to the fact that early Spanish as well as Indian historians did not support this viewpoint was to discount any such non-supportive data. According to Engels, these were obviously people who "learned nothing and knew nothing", they were only interpreting the Aztecs in terms of the Spanish feudal system anyway. It becomes evident from reading Engels that if evidence disagreed with progressive evolutionist theory, the evidence therefore was wrong, not the theory. Progressive evolutionary ideas on the formation and development of cultures has little support today. It is a viewpoint that the majority of contemporary specialists on this subject have abandoned (Radin, 1920, p. 129).

The concept of a tribal, classless, and democratic Aztec society based on the type of methodology used by such people as Engels, as well as Vaillant to a lesser extent, discredits the progressive evolutionary theory in the minds of most investigators. To cast out any evidence which disagrees with a theory is no longer considered even slightly acceptable in scientific circles. As a matter of fact, there is an entire school developing among certain scientific methodologists where negative evidence becomes the primary focus for their attention. Today the entire concept of progressive evolution is in disrepute. In some communist countries, however, there is still an occasional paper being produced which reflects this viewpoint.

In summary, the foregoing was an attempt to represent some of the historical background of the major interpretations of Aztec governmental development. First is the interpretation of the Aztec government in terms of the Spanish feudal system: second, the central-imperialist interpretation which viewed the Aztec gov-



ernment as being very suggestive of both Greek and Roman systems: third, the progressive evolutionist viewpoint which developed out of the early works on biological evolution. These theories as well as some of their methods were applied to culture development.

Today, in Mexico, there has developed a neo-evolutionary or in some cases avowedly non-evolutionary theories of pre-conquest Aztec government. The major people in the field, in my opinion, presently hold to the neo-evolutionist idea. Although the neo-evolutionist sees a sequence of stages in the development of a single culture or in a group of related cultures, unlike the progressive evolutionists, he rejects the idea of progress (Hewett 1936, p. 71; White, 1940, p. 12 and 24; Goldenweisser, 1941, p. 152). According to the neo-evolutionists, cultures do not have to evolve toward any special goals. The neo-evolutionist argues that all cultures must necessarily pass through a sequence of stages and although they are willing to take into account many causes, they point out that no one factor is needed to define a stage. This is a reasonably new theory, elements of which were initiated in the thirties. Basically, however, the total concept has its origin some time early in 1950 or shortly after the Second World War (Willey, 1962, p. 10; Willey and Phillips, 1962, p. 17, 196-199; Strong, 1951, p. 278, 279; Green, 1963, p. 98; Hester, 1962, p. 1014).

As to be expected, there have been modifications, additions and some variations in the viewpoints expressed earlier in this paper. A rising or at least a relatively new interpretation is that of the feudal-imperialists. This is a modification of some of the earlier viewpoints. In this interpretation Aztec culture has a definite correlation to the structure of society in medieval Europe. It assumes that the Aztec empire was dominated by a military or theocratic aristocracy. All thoughts of a democratic tribal Aztec society are rejected. From the Emperor down to the least member of the society, there existed a complicated hierarchy of greater and lesser nobility. Viewed as feudal lords, the nobles lived on and ruled over private estates on which the common man labored. The estates would have been semi-hereditary. The ruler was elected by the nobles from their rank and became in the latter days of Aztec dominance an emperor ruling over large tributary provinces.

As Feldman pointed out in a recent paper (Feldman, 1966, p. 173), all of these interpretations have an application to what is known of the Aztec state, society and culture. They all have been indifferently or differently emphasized at various periods in the last four hundred years. If one views Aztec history as being stratified into three temporal periods, then the progressive evolutionist ideas of such men as Vaillant and Engels were important primarily in the earliest period. With the rise of Itzcoatl and the beginning the period of great conquest there is little doubt that the Aztec government was a strong military aristocracy with overtones of theocratic influence and was very probably semi-hereditary in structure. The last period which preceded the arrival of the Spanish in 1519 was the time of political consolidation. At this time all of the allied states were subordinated to the government at Tenochtitlan and Moctezuma taking increasing power for himself imposed strict controls over the provinces and made Tenochtitlan the single, absolute political center of what can be defined as an empire.

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